

SNOW
WHITE &
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HELL



VAMPIRES OF HADES BOOK TWO

STELLA DEL MAR

SNOW WHITE IN HELL

THE VAMPIRES OF HADES BOOK TWO

STELLA DEL MAR

STAR SEA

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Forgael. Yet never have two lovers kissed but they believed there was some other near at hand, and almost wept because they could not find it.

Aibric. When they have twenty years; in middle life they take a kiss for what a kiss is worth, and let the dream go by.

Forgael. It's not a dream, but the reality that makes our passion as a lamp shadow—no—no lamp, the sun. What the world's million lips are thirsting for must be substantial somewhere.

W.B. YEATS, "THE SHADOWY WATERS"

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PRELUDE

THE WITCH STARES into the mirror as if admiring her own reflection, but I can feel her cold gaze judging me through the glass—judging and finding me lacking. She would lock me in a tower or shove me in an oven if she thought she could get away with it.

Except this isn't a fairy tale, and I'm not a princess—even if my stepmother is evil. And as much as I despise Suzanne, she isn't a real witch. But she does hate me more than anyone beneath our dome. Hell, she probably hates me more than anyone in all the colonies.

Now, she taps a long purple nail against the polished mahogany of her vanity. "Well, get in here, child. I don't have all day."

The household drudges already warned me that Suzanne had more beauty mods implanted during my last semester at university. So when she summoned me, my heart sank because I knew what was coming next. My suspicion is confirmed by the sight of her Lethe propped against the base of the mirror... waiting.

I hate this ritual. I wish she'd stop insisting that we run the mirror app together. And yet I know she never will—not until she gets the result she wants. If I could figure out how to make the mirror daemon lie, I'd rig it so that she'd win. Anything not to have to do this again.

But I majored in mythology, not programming. And even if I hadn't, well... the mirror app is an integral part of the algorithm's source code. It would take the most brilliant hacker in the world to crack it.

In my desperation, I've tried appealing directly to the daemon instead. But whatever sentience it possesses apparently contains no room for strategic lies or anything other than brutal logic and the unvarnished truth.

So dreading the scene I know is about to unfold, I enter my father and stepmother's bedroom. I hate this room. Suzanne demanded a lot of changes when she married Dad. But the changes she made to this room have been the hardest to bear. It's so cold now, so utterly sterile. Just like her.

At first, I thought her inability to have her own children was why my stepmother hated me. And maybe that is part of it, even if plenty of women are infertile these days. But if so, that's not the main reason. It's not *the* reason.

No, she hates me because of my beauty.

It sounds conceited, but it's an objective fact that I'm beautiful. When I turned thirteen and the protocols allowed me to be added to the algorithm's dataset, the mirror daemon confirmed it. Not only am I beautiful, but—

“I said get over here, girl. Don't linger in the doorway and gawk.”

Sighing, I make my way over to the vanity, hoping that somehow the result will be different this time. The drudges' warning has at least meant that I've had time to change into ugly clothes and try to ruin my appearance. Not that it will help. No matter how hard I try, the daemon refuses to change its answer.

Suzanne slides along the small bench that sits in front of her vanity, making room for me. Reluctantly, I sit beside her, careful to leave as much of a gap as I can between us. Familiar with how this works, I place my own Lethe facedown on the vanity, staring into the black screen of Suzanne's Lethe as we wait for the daemon.

While I know that the face that appears in the mirror app being called a daemon is a vestige of outdated programming speak, I can't help but think of the daemons in mythology. We don't really know how the Greeks truly viewed them—whether they were seen as benign spirits, mere messengers between the gods and humans, or malign forces that caused discord.

But this particular daemon thrives on causing discord. And each time, it seems to take longer for the algorithm to summon it. Sometimes my stepmother uses the wait to berate me for my flaws. But today she's sullen and apparently in no mood to talk, and so we wait in silence.

As we do, our reflections stare back at us, showing both the irony and tragedy of her obsession.

Because my stepmother and I don't look that unlike. Or rather, we didn't before she became addicted to the mods. Because I look like my mother, and my father is clearly a man who has a “type.” That's the irony.

The tragedy is that while Suzanne was indeed a great beauty when she married Dad a decade ago, her obsession with getting the daemon to change its answer has altered and distorted her appearance. She's nearly skeletal now because she's decided that starving herself is the way to get the daemon to declare her the winner. But worse than that are the beauty mods she keeps getting. They make her look more like a robotic doll than a woman.

Not that he's ever said it, but I know Dad doesn't find her attractive anymore. Yet I can't even take satisfaction in that because he's made it clear that he blames me for his wife's obsession. And that's why I despise Suzanne—she took my father away from me. On paper, I might not be an orphan, but in reality, I may as well be.

University at least allowed me to leave the estate and live in a solo pod. Normally, only orphans are permitted to live alone while completing their studies. The official reason given for my independence was that the nature of my major meant that I'd benefit from being near the archives. But most mythology majors simply request scans or photographs of documents that haven't yet been digitized. No, the real reason was that Dad used his position to pull some strings.

He wanted me out of his dome and away from his wife. Soon enough, I'll be out of both of their lives permanently. Once the algorithm assigns me my mate, I'll be able to leave my father's estate and never look back.

Because I can't keep doing this. My stepmother may force me to take part in this sick ritual because she wants to be able to gloat when the daemon finally declares her the winner, wants to watch my humiliation. But honestly? I'll throw a party if that day ever comes.

A chime sounds and a ghostly face appears on Suzanne's Lethe. My heart pounds as she recites the command phrase—a phrase that haunts my dreams.

Mirror, mirror, who sees all,

Who's the fairest of them all?

I hold my breath, but of course the daemon returns the same verdict it always does.

You, my mistress, are fair; it is true.

But the lady Alyssa is a thousand times fairer than you.

I hold my breath as Suzanne's face goes a deathly shade of white, save for twin red spots that appear on either cheek. She grips the edge of the vanity, presumably to stop herself from shattering yet another Lethe, and her knuckles turn white too. But before she can unleash the tirade I've come to expect, a chime sounds from my own Lethe. The notification tone is a new one, one I've never heard before.

Hand trembling, I pick up the Lethe and select the notification that's appeared on the screen. My match has been assigned. Finally.

Ignoring the daemon, Suzanne cranes her head forward to read the details of my match. Of course there's no photo of him—women aren't permitted to see that detail unless we click "accept." Other personal details are provided, however. But just as I'm beginning to read the dossier the algorithm has prepared, a red X fills the screen.

I stare at it, not believing what I'm seeing, even as my stepmother starts cackling. While the daemon may have let her down, she apparently gets to witness my humiliation today after all.

"Rejected! Ha!" She leans forward, dissolving into peals of maniacal laughter.

I sit there, numb, simply letting her laugh. Her laughter is the least of my worries right now. But eventually, she composes herself enough to reach forward and close out the mirror app on her own Lethe, deciding that exulting in my misfortune is more satisfying than verbally abusing the daemon.

She turns and faces me. "You may have that daemon fooled, girl. But clearly your looks weren't enough to trick the poor chump the algorithm tried to fob you off on. Your future isn't looking so pretty now, eh?"

I stare at the scarlet X, not answering. Because she's right. Women get one chance. If we don't match on the first try, it's game over.

Feeling as if I've fallen into a nightmare I can't escape, I wordlessly leave the room, clutching my Lethe, Suzanne's cruel laughter ringing in my ears.

I've been such a fool. The possibility of being rejected never even occurred to me. Sure, I've always said that looks don't really matter. But on some level, I guess I thought my appearance would make it a no-brainer for any man to accept me. Because men *do* see photos of their matches. The policy is sexist and stupid, but most aspects of life in the colonies are. Until now I've tolerated it because the sexism has worked to my advantage.

It isn't fair, but the world is generally kind to a beautiful face.

But this time my beauty wasn't enough. I wasn't enough. My mate was provided with a thorough dossier, countless photos and videos, and still clicked "deny."

I lock myself in my room, trying to come to terms with the fact that he rejected me. Despite my disgust with the daemon for its choice to further deepen the discord between me and my stepmother, I open the mirror app on my Lethe. I shouldn't, but it's the one source of comfort I have left. When the wavering face appears, I recite a different command phrase from the one Suzanne prefers.

Mirror, mirror, whose sight sets you apart,

Who loves me with all their heart?

My own heart clenches as I wait for the daemon to respond. What if it doesn't work this time? But in this, at least, the daemon indulges me.

Many love you, mistress; on this you may depend.

But a mother's love for her child is without end.

The daemon's face shimmers, replaced by a meadow I know well, though I've never visited it. Fields of flowers no longer exist in this world, so the sight of my mother walking through one only hammers home the fact that she's forever beyond reach. Well, maybe not *forever*, but for a very long time still. Even if my lifespan will likely be shorter now that I've been rejected.

As the pain of this new reality fully hits me, mingling with the sadness I still feel over Mom's death, I finally let myself cry. Begging the daemon to show me her was a mistake. The videos it provides aren't even real. The algorithm is powerful, sure. But as advanced as the daemon's artificial intelligence is, not even it can see beyond the veil.

If there even is a veil. Reason says there's nothing once we die, but believing that feels so *final*. It's why I threw myself into the study of mythology. I want to believe there's something more than the life I've known in the colonies. A better world, one where magic is real.

A world with hope, something I no longer have.

It wasn't that I was counting on being matched to save me or complete me or any nonsense like that. But being rejected has sealed my fate.

For most women, being a reject in itself would be awful enough because it would all but guarantee a truly awful assignment. No one wants to be a drudge—or worse. But for me, because of who my

father is, it means something even worse.

My stepmother is about to make my life a living hell.

BAEL

THE SIREN SONG of the slot machines serenades me. But unlike Odysseus's men, I need neither bits of wax pressed into my ears nor any other trickery to resist their call. Gambling is a diversion for my guests, the lost mortal souls who wander through my land. None of the temptations on offer test my self-control. Only one substance in all the realms does, but even that weakness I've mastered. Mostly.

Despite the late hour, the resort is as busy as ever, although that's par for the course at Las Vegas's most popular destination. Not that it's listed in any mortal directory or travel brochure.

No, the guests who benefit from a stay at the Lotus find their own way here. And for the most part, they find what they expect. My illusions guarantee it.

Like all casinos, the Lotus is pure fantasy, disconnected from drab reality. Soaring ceilings and marble floors create the illusion of palatial splendor. Stained glass skylights vault overhead. Fountains and foliage provide plenty of opportunities for romantic trysts. And complex spells create the finishing touches that mortal artifice could never hope to achieve.

But the Lotus isn't just breathtaking—it's home. This empire I built, filled with living breathing mortals, has been my refuge for centuries—not the cold, dark halls of my father's palace. Its location in relation to the geography of the mortal realms has changed, moving with the shifting tides of human history and fortunes, but its essential nature has remained fixed. And one of the hallmarks of the Lotus is its perennial popularity with mortals.

Were my realm not so vast, the crowds of dazed tourists wandering among sculptures and exhibits would make it feel crowded. But these days, the Lotus is quintessentially American. Which means that, unlike in Europe, nothing feels small or cramped. It's a space large enough for mortals to disappear in, and some do.

If only I could disappear. On nights like this, when I need to clear my head, the desire for true solitude weighs on me. So despite knowing it's an impossible dream, I seek out the quiet, moving mostly unseen through my realm.

Passing through an unmarked door, I slip into the east gardens. Within this illusion that recreates the grounds of one of my family's English estates, it's quieter, less crowded. But still, this space is a playground for tourists, too, and I'm not yet alone.

Actual solitude is an elusive experience in this pleasure realm I oversee. Yes, there's the comparative privacy of the penthouse. But even there, my staff can easily reach me. And sometimes, I don't want to be reached.

Because the full scope of my responsibilities extends beyond overseeing the busiest of the liminal realms. And tonight, it's those other responsibilities that trouble me.

Dad has shown little interest in familial concerns in recent centuries. He's been too busy fucking up his own life—and ruling the underworld in his spare time. Meaning that the responsibility of leading this family falls to me.

It's a duty I've accepted willingly. Keeping my brothers out of trouble, however, isn't an easy feat. I failed on that score with Dante, but I'm determined not to make the same mistakes with the twins. Not that I know *how* I'm going to do that.

Honestly, I'm at the end of my rope with them or I wouldn't be wandering through my gardens hoping that inspiration strikes. Because while I could reach my destination simply by willing it so, I've found that walking outdoors clarifies my thoughts and focuses my purpose.

And isn't that the problem? The twins *have* no purpose.

While mortals romanticize the idea of eternal life, immortality is more of a burden than a blessing if you lack purpose and direction. Most tragedies can be laid at the feet of gods and goddesses with too much time on their hands. And the twins, well...

Valefar and Malphas have always been wild and carefree. But I'd hoped they'd eventually settle down. For a short time, at least when measured against eternity, they'd seemed to. Trying to break the spell Dante was under provided at least a nominal focus for their days, as did overseeing the security measures around the chamber he slept in. But then a mortal managed to awaken Dante—ironically, when Mal was supposed to be guarding him—and that purpose evaporated alongside Dante's drugged slumber.

Eternal life with no purpose is a bloody waste. But more than that, it's dangerous.

Levi and Corson at least seem to recognize that, albeit in their own ways. But it's a concept that my three youngest brothers have always struggled with. Dante nearly destroyed his sanity trying to fill that hole with romantic attachments. And it may make me a cynic, but I've watched his hopes shatter too often to relax until I know whether the ritual worked this time. The garbled message he sent via demon gives me pause, but for once, he's not my immediate concern.

The twins are. I only wish I knew what to do about them.

As I consider the question, I wander deeper into the gardens. Years of habit bring me, as always, to the entrance to the hedge maze. No fairy lights or Chinese lanterns cast their soft glow upon the maze's mysteries. Only pale moonlight illuminates these paths. But even were it not for my preternatural vision, I'd need no other light to find my way. These are paths my feet know well.

The Lotus is my life's work. It is *my* realm, created by me, the product of my magic. And within that realm, I know all the secret paths that promise solitude as intimately as a lover's body. The reflecting pool at the center of the maze is one such place.

When I reach the small clearing at the maze's center, however, I pause, lingering in the shadows. Another is already here.

A female mortal sits at the pool's edge, staring into its waters. Poised on that knife's edge between adolescence and maturity, she has the body of a woman and the scent of a girl. Innocence, inexperience, the promise of countless tomorrows that are still a lifetime away.

Her attire is utterly modern and unremarkable—denim trousers and a tight, sleeveless top. But there's something about her, something that calls to me as I watch from the shadows. She stands out from the other beings who move through my realm. The Lotus is filled with beautiful women, but she's in a class of her own. Positively stunning.

Dark, serious eyes, high cheekbones, full lips. Thick dark hair cascading onto creamy shoulders. Long legs. Delectable curves.

I want her. I want to taste the mix of sensuality and innocence those luscious lips promise. I want to run my hands over those curves. Want to tangle my fingers in that hair as she's sucking my cock.

But while her beauty caught my eye, the lust she inspires isn't the reason she stands out.

There's an alertness about her that I rarely observe in mortals who pass through my doors. Somehow, she's wide awake while in my realm of soporific decadence. And then there's her scent...

Strange nighttime flowers I can't quite place, on the verge of blooming but not yet. Innocence, yes, but laced through it all is the profound sadness of one lost. Her scent calls to me. Calls to me in the way of when like recognizes like.

Still not leaving the obscurity of the shadows, I draw nearer. Closer proximity shows that she's older than I initially thought. Twenties, not teens, perhaps as old even as twenty-five, given how self-possessed she seems.

With beauty like that, it's hard to tell.

Because she has the sort of timeless good looks that defy classification. The kind of beauty that will still be turning heads when she's forty-five, if not longer. A beauty that I crave to touch.

I should go. I didn't wander out here to pick up women, let alone one who clearly desires to be alone. And yet my curiosity renders me immobile, frozen at the clearing's edge.

No, I shouldn't be here. Never should one such as I be alone in the darkness with a creature so innocent and fair. The temptation is too great. And yet... she shouldn't be here either. No mortal within my realm should be aware enough to find this maze's heart.

Yet somehow, she has. And so I watch her, and I wait.

ALYSSA

COMING HERE WAS A MISTAKE. The resort's name alone should have been a red flag. Because when Odysseus and his men came across the isle of the lotus-eaters, they forgot about home, forgot about everything they'd ever cared about, became consumed with mindless pleasure. And that's exactly what I've done since arriving here.

The Lotus is nothing but a glittering, glitzy trap. I know this now. A beautiful trap, but a trap all the same. One designed to lure the unwary with its decadent promises.

Buffets filled with delicacies, more food than any person could possibly eat. Freely flowing alcohol at all hours of the day and night. Not to mention the menagerie, the spa, the dozens of themed restaurants and shops... And then there are the games. Blackjack, poker, roulette, craps, baccarat, keno.

Sure, some of the guests are merely here for fun, eager to enjoy the thrill of wagering money they can afford to lose. But I've started to suspect that the true cost of the Lotus's diversions is a debt that can be repaid with neither cryptocurrency nor even coin, as rare as coins are these days.

Of course, when Bea and I were first rejected, spending a few weeks in hedonistic bliss seemed like a no-brainer—my best, and perhaps only, chance to lose my virginity on my own terms. But now I know we were fools to come here. I'm still a virgin, and this trip has done nothing but strain our friendship. The childish part of me wants to blame her, but in truth, I think we share the blame. Or maybe, as insane as it seems, the resort itself is to blame.

One day into our stay here, Bea bailed on me, just straight up disappeared for... well, I don't even know for how long. That's the problem. When she never came back from her walk after lunch, I should have been frantic. Instead, I just felt annoyed, more concerned with spa treatments and dancing all night than *finding my missing friend*.

But today, or maybe it was yesterday, a resort employee delivered a message. A note handwritten on actual paper. That note was a wake-up call. It made me realize how self-absorbed and lost I'd become in just a matter of days. Because until that note arrived, I hadn't even realized that Bea's suitcase had disappeared from our room.

Last-minute change of plans, have to run to Greece. Wait here for me.

XOXO,

Her message makes no sense. Neither the peninsula nor the remaining islands that constituted the former nation of Greece have been called “Greece” in decades. It’s a term only used in academic contexts. But also... there’s nothing beneath those domes besides textile factories.

But if nothing else, her message made me aware of how unfocused my days have been, how lost I’ve become since arriving here. And yet it’s hard to think straight when surrounded by temptation.

So, clutching Bea’s note and using every ounce of willpower I possessed, I forced myself to walk until the omnipresent murmur of the Lotus lessened. And that’s how I ended up at the center of this maze, alone beside a still and silent pool of water.

The sun hadn’t yet set when I arrived, but now the blackness of night surrounds me. I can barely make out Bea’s note in the moonlight, but I’ve memorized it at this point.

Those two terse sentences trouble me. It’s not *safe* for an unassigned reject to wander unescorted and undeclared between colonies. It took us weeks to get approval to come here, and even that required my father’s intervention.

He only did it to get me away from Suzanne. Not because her cruelty toward me bothers him, but because her escalating tantrums every time she insists on running the mirror app disturb his peace and quiet.

And there have been so many shattered Lethes in the last few weeks. Because reject or not, the daemon still insists that I’m the fairest. Fat lot of good *that’s* done me.

Ghostly in the moonlight, my reflection stares back at me from the dark, still waters of the pool. Beauty is deceptive. It can’t tell you what’s in a person’s heart. Suzanne was beautiful when she matched with my father. Yet her beauty only masked her inner ugliness.

But the worst thing about beauty is that it’s not just deceptive, it’s worthless. It couldn’t save my mother, and it won’t save me. Nothing can.

I’m starting to feel properly sorry for myself when a glinting copper circle arcs across the darkness and splashes into the water. Ripples radiate from its resting place in the pool’s center.

“Penny for your thoughts.”

A tall, dark-haired man steps out of the shadows. His chiseled jaw, emphasized by a short haircut and close shave, is balanced by a sensual mouth and dark, brooding eyes.

His tailored pants and designer shirt scream money, *real* money, and power—the kind of power and influence only a select few wield these days. I should know; I’ve been surrounded by that kind of wealth all my life. But it’s neither his attire nor his pretty face that leaves me speechless.

Because while his clothes suggest an executive or politician on vacation, the body beneath them is pure muscle. A large body, a powerful body, a body that makes me think naughty things. A body that reminds me why Bea and I came to the Lotus in the first place...

“Mind if I join you?” he asks. The five words are polite on the surface, but his tone is utterly wicked.

He sits on the low stone wall surrounding the pool without waiting for a reply. Close, perhaps half a foot is between us, maybe less. If I weren't so fascinated by this man, I'd find the proximity presumptuous. But something about his scent on the still night air is intoxicating, addictive. It makes me wish he'd move closer.

What the hell is happening here?

Because, sure, this guy is hot. But then so are a lot of men.

Not as hot as this guy...

I shake my head to dispel whatever mindless lust has short-circuited my brain, but I can't escape this man's scent—clean, crisp, and yet almost smoky somehow. It's intoxicating. *He's* intoxicating.

“Where did you find the penny?” I ask, latching onto the first conversational gambit that comes to mind. “Pretty rare to simply throw away.”

The man frowns. “Where are you from?”

“Elonia.” Only after I've reflexively said the name of my colony do I realize that he's sidestepped my question.

“Ah, that explains it, although I wouldn't have guessed from your accent.” His expression clears. “It was a two-pence piece, actually. Didn't have a penny, but I'm too superstitious to visit this pool without making a wish.”

At his mention of my accent, I realize he has none, but that's common enough among certain professions, namely those requiring excessive hours spent in either espace or actual travel. Not that I have much of one myself, not with the education I've received. Funny that he'd comment on it.

“If superstitions were real, then I'm afraid I'd be cursed,” I say with a laugh, “since the only currency I have is crypto.”

“Don't joke about curses.” He brushes a strand of hair away from my face.

Perhaps it's the unexpected intimacy of the gesture, but a strange spark shoots through me at his touch. I shiver. The confusing part is how much I long to experience it again.

Knowing it's a violation of the protocols but unable to resist, I place my hand on his knee, struggling not to lose myself in the intensity of his gaze. “You're telling me you have personal experience with being cursed?” I raise an eyebrow.

“The world is more full of sadness than you can understand.” His hand covers mine, and our fingers intertwine. “And hopefully than you'll ever find out. Even if...”

He pauses, and I wait. I'm too aware of how small my fingers are within his larger ones—and of how alive my whole body suddenly feels. It's as if an unseen current passes between us, drawing us closer, making me long for something I can't name.

Several heartbeats pass, then he sighs and squeezes my hand before releasing it. “The world is full of magic things, patiently waiting for our senses to grow sharper. But perhaps it's best if yours don't,

beauty.”

“I have a name,” I say, surprised by how much I miss his touch, by how much its absence hurts. “And if you were trying to flirt, Yeats has better poems for that than the two you chose.”

“A girl from Elonia who recognizes Yeats. A mystery I’m tempted to solve, and yet I half-fear the answer will be disappointingly mundane. Let me guess, you’re majoring in historical English literature?”

I shake my head. “Mythology, actually. And I completed my studies last month.”

“What delicious irony.” I miss the movement, but suddenly he’s closer. “A beauty who’s memorized Greek lore best forgotten *and* somehow found my pool.”

“How is this *your* pool?” I ask, the increased proximity forcing me to look up into eyes dark enough to lose myself in.

But once more, he sidesteps my question, offering instead another of his own. “What is your name, beauty?”

“Alyssa,” I reply, staring into the water, anywhere but into those eyes.

With gentle fingers, he turns my face toward his, forcing me to meet his gaze. And once more, my entire body comes alive at his touch.

“Tell me, Alyssa, what line from Yeats would you prefer?”

Heart racing, my mind goes blank. But then in the still night air, the words come to me, a fragment of a poem I can’t fully recall.

“Take a kiss for what a kiss is worth.”

The words tumble from my lips before I can fully consider them. But instead of laughing at my lack of subtlety, he places a hand on the back of my neck and lowers his head, bringing us closer. And then I’m falling toward him as he brushes his lips against mine.

It’s barely a kiss, and yet it sears me, awakening a desire for more. His scent surrounds me, and my eyes drift closed as he pulls me even closer, his fingers tangling in my hair.

His lips claim mine, possessive, demanding. And then I’m on his lap, in his arms, the maze and the pool forgotten as I become lost in a world where only we exist. A world where the hard outline of his cock presses up against me through the fabric of my jeans, causing an ache deep within my core that I know only he can satisfy.

Kissing him feels like falling, a fall I never want to end. This isn’t how I imagined my first kiss, and yet it’s somehow everything I never knew I lacked.

His lips move to my neck, and I gasp. No one has ever kissed me there, no one has ever kissed me, period, and I’m completely unprepared for the feelings his mouth elicits.

“Please,” I murmur, not even sure what I’m asking for, but knowing I need it, knowing I need more. I pull my hair aside, offering him better access.

The arms embracing me tense, and he buries his head against my shoulder. “Innocent child, gorgeous fool, you have no idea what you ask.”

The murmured words are nearly too low for me to hear—and then he’s gone.

BAEL

THE SILHOUETTE of the High Roller stands still and unmoving as dawn threatens. But the neon lights of the giant Ferris wheel still shine—illuminated by mortal ingenuity, not the cheap parlor tricks of a cursed god. The view from my penthouse is rare in that it's one of the few things in my realm that is unequivocally real. Normally, I find solace in that, but tonight the panoramic expanse of the Las Vegas skyline mocks me as I look out upon my favorite of the mortal realms.

I wonder whether the girl from Elonia sees the same sight. Not all the guest rooms offer views of the true sin city, the original so to speak. But I've instructed the staff to place those from the dome world in suites with outward-facing views whenever possible. What better way to breed discontent than by showing them something they'll never have?

Punishments don't fall under my purview, strictly speaking. Matching mortals with the fates they deserve is what my father does when souls reach *his* realm. And yet don't I punish those denizens of that most dystopian mortal realm each time I show them what they've lost?

Each time I show them all they threw away...

And what did you throw away tonight? A mere tuppence or something more?

Other than the glow of the Vegas skyline, my bedroom is dark, all light banished from it. But the darkness does little to dim my vision, and even less to dim that internal eye that sees her in the moonlit maze still.

So young, stupidly young, and more than young—*innocent*. Honor dictated I walk away. Honor and morality and any notion of right and wrong.

But you didn't walk away, you fled, like the coward you are.

Tossing my clothes into the hamper, I sprawl facedown on cool, silk sheets. But burying my face against the smooth softness of the pillow reminds me of the creamy skin of her shoulder as the curtain of her hair fell around me, and I can't help but recall the scent of her as my fangs elongated and I nearly bit her.

Innocent child, gorgeous fool, creature who nearly undid my self-control.

Who was she to beg me to commit an act she can't even name? But then who was I to approach her in the moonlight? Bloody groping in the gardens like a besotted schoolboy. I knew better. I *know* better.

Moonlight and madness and being led by urges I've too long denied.

I should summon a thrall. It would be as simple as activating the intercom and having one sent up. I should, but I won't because a thrall's blood isn't what I want. Fucking hell, *blood* isn't even what I want, not really.

Yes, I nearly bit her, and that lapse would have been unforgivable enough. But I could have stopped short of killing her, then erased her memory. It wouldn't have been ideal, wouldn't have been good form, but no one can live under this curse as long as I have without the occasional digression from perfect form.

No, the desire to drink from her in and of itself wasn't why I fled that maze like a fucking coward.

No, gods help me, I *wanted* her.

The silent admission has me rock hard again. My cock presses against the sheets, the fabric nearly as soft as her skin, and my fangs press against my lower lip, both demanding a satisfaction I dare not seek.

With a groan, I roll onto my back, already stroking my cock, knowing it won't be enough. Knowing that no action I take tonight will be enough—or at least no action that I'll permit myself to take.

Rules govern my existence. The rules imposed by the goddess who cursed me that I chafe against. But there are also the rules that *I* have imposed, the code I live by.

Only drink from thralls. Never kill while drinking. And never, ever fall in love.

Three rules. Three simple rules that I've never struggled to follow until now. But with each stroke of my hand in the darkness, I'm fighting the temptation to break all three.

Not that I *want* to kill the girl from Elonia, the gorgeous innocent whose name I refuse to allow myself to think, let alone say. But what I wanted from her, what I wanted to take when she so prettily begged, when she whispered the word that nearly undid me—*please*—wasn't just her blood, although I wanted that too. No, I wanted to take everything.

All of her.

Just a kiss. A kiss I so foolishly stole when she taunted me with that line from Yeats, a line I doubt she understands. *Take a kiss for what a kiss is worth.*

My hand moves faster, and I am not gentle. Gentleness is neither what I deserve nor what I want tonight. She failed to complete the goddamn line...

And let the dream go by.

I meant to let the dream of her pass by me—I meant to, and I will because anything else is madness.

Whatever my brothers may claim, I am not a monk. I may not indulge my passions as freely as they do, but indulge them I have. The women over the centuries blur together, inconsequential despite their beauty and charm. I am *not* a schoolboy wet behind the ears, to be so undone by a single kiss...

And yet she has—undone me. Wanking in the dark like a teenager, unable to forget the temptation of her neck beneath my lips, the maddening weight of her squirming on my lap, further inflaming my desires.

Because I didn't simply want her blood, her innocence, to claim her body completely and forever as *mine*. No, I wanted to do the one thing I vowed I'd never do. I wanted to drink from her until that fire in her eyes dimmed. I wanted to drain every last drop and then discover whether *my* blood, my cursed blood, would revive her and thus end the curse.

And it is that, of all things, that finally pushes me toward release. The thought of her dead, then not. The impossible resurrection I dare not effect. A gorgeous, foolish child from fucking *Elonia* opening her eyes, looking up at me with such innocence, and knowing then that she is mine—forever and always, until the twilight of the gods.

Let the dream go by.

I must, but I don't know whether I can. My seed spills over my hand, and I fear I damn myself and damn her with the single word I whisper into the darkness.

Alyssa.

ALYSSA

THE ROSY-FINGERED DAWN paints the Vegas skyline. It's gorgeous, enchanting... and utterly fake.

The atmosphere outside the domes became too toxic to allow for luxuries like sunrises and sunsets decades ago. The view through my window is as much of an illusion as the resort's "beach" and the moonlit gardens filled with purely ornamental vegetation and air that's not only breathable but perfumed. Because as seductive as the Lotus's simulations may be, even the most naive child can spot them for the lab-designed lies they are.

Bea needs to hurry up and get back here. Because one thing is obvious—I need to get the hell out of the Lotus. And fast.

The simulations are simply too complex, too *good* to do anything other than ruin me for real life. For the first time, I wish I'd chosen a more technical field of study than mythology. But I don't need a degree in AI or virtual reality to know that this is all false, impossible, fleeting. It's merely a modern iteration of the temptation Odysseus encountered when he arrived in the *real* land of the lotus-eaters.

And that stranger in the garden is the modern male equivalent of Circe, if there ever was one. The only difference is that he lured me with moonlight and poetry instead of song. I'm just lucky that he didn't invite me to dinner and turn me into a pig.

Yeah, he did me a favor by running off with no explanation—that is assuming he was even real. For all I know, he was some hallucination brought on by stress and the constant bombardment of the resort's simulations.

Hallucination or dream or bored playboy, I'm glad that *he* at least came to his senses and fled before I did something I'd have regretted. Because I would have regretted it. It was naivety itself to think that I could come here and just casually lose my virginity with a random stranger.

Kissing him proved that.

One kiss, and I can't get him out of my head. One meaningless kiss. I shouldn't still be thinking about him. My body shouldn't still ache for his touch.

I don't know where the hell Bea is, but I do know that I've wasted enough days dreaming and drifting, lulled by the resort's blandishments. It's time to put childish fantasies aside and grow up. Better to never know what could have been than to spend the rest of my life missing something that could never

last.

But as if my thoughts somehow reached Bea across the miles, the custom ringtone I assigned to her breaks the still silence of the room. Heart pounding, I jump out of bed, racing to dig my Lethe out of the suitcase I'd stowed it in, nominally in an attempt to "unplug" but mostly to prevent myself from staring at the stupid red X.

Ignoring the dozens of unread notifications, I answer the video call. Bea's smiling face and unruly red curls fill my screen.

"Alyssa!" she squeals. "I hope I didn't wake you. I tried to wait until it was a decent hour there to call you, but I couldn't stand it anymore. Oh my god, I have so much to tell you."

Whatever annoyance I'd been feeling over Bea's disappearing act evaporates in the face of her enthusiasm, and a weight I hadn't realized I'd been carrying lifts at the sight of her alive and unharmed. I try to take in the details of *where* she's actually at, but she's holding her Lethe close enough that it's difficult to make out what's behind her in the frame.

I hesitate, considering how to reply. I didn't manage to sleep at all after that strange encounter in the garden last night. But I don't say that, reluctant to delve into my own drama when I have so many questions only she can answer.

So instead I say, "No worries, I was already awake." I tentatively return her smile. "And umm yeah, that's the understatement of the century. Your note made zero sense. There's nothing *in* Greece—which is a weird thing to call Armanonia by the way. Also, how the hell did you even get clearance to travel there at such short notice?" When she doesn't answer right away, I can't help but add, "Oh my god, please tell me that you *did* get clearance."

Bea blushes and glances over at something I can't see off camera. Finally, she takes a deep breath and looks directly at me. "We have *a lot* to catch up on, but the short version is... I was getting married." She glances off camera again, and a guy slides into the frame beside her. "To Dante."

I take in the guy who has a possessive arm draped over my best friend's shoulder. Tall, dark, and handsome, just like the stranger in the garden, although this guy's beauty is of a different sort. He has dark curly hair and delicate features that look almost angelic. Were it not for the guy's size, he'd look almost effeminate. But there's nothing effeminate about the way he's looking at Bea.

She clears her throat now, and gesturing toward the guy says, "Alyssa, uh, meet Dante."

I offer the guy a small, shocked wave and he nods in return. But I still say nothing, waiting for the explanation Bea *knows* she owes me. But as the awkward silence stretches out, I feel my previous irritation with her returning.

"Explain," I demand, my tone bitchier than I intend for it to be. Because she does owe me an explanation. We were both rejected. How the hell has she managed to *marry* anyone, let alone in the space of a few days? And why did she exclude me from something so important?

She sighs. "I'm not sure where to even start..." she begins, then trails off. "Although I guess... well, umm, so the algorithm glitched."

I raise an eyebrow. “Glitched how? You’re telling me he’s your assigned mate?” I ask, not even trying to keep the skepticism out of my voice.

Because glitch in the algorithm or not, last-minute elopements are *not* how the protocols work. People don’t just match and get married the next day. There’s a mandated courtship period, physical testing to undergo...

So I’m not surprised when Bea shakes her head. “No, Dante isn’t my assigned mate. I, uh, may have rejected the mate the algorithm assigned.”

I stare at her, at a total loss. I’m still trying to process this revelation when she continues. “Anyway, Hec—” The guy sitting next to her clears his throat and shoots her a look. “Uh, sorry, some stuff I probably should just fill you in on in person. Anyway, my friend has been working on correcting the glitch with *your* match. She, umm, well... I thought she’d done that before we left the Lotus but apparently not. And connecting to the network here is a bit iffy.”

“One sec,” I say, head spinning at this revelation. Then I minimize the video chat with Bea and open the match app. The red X has been replaced by a green circle. *Match accepted. Confirm or deny?*

I toggle back over to the video chat with Bea—and her new husband. She’s staring at the camera, a look of concern on her face.

“He accepted me,” I say, voice hollow. “My match... I’m not a reject.”

“Of course you aren’t!” Bea replies, then adds, too quickly, “But don’t click ‘confirm’ just yet, okay? Wait until we can talk outside of espace. I have to tell you about Greece first. There are—”

But then the call abruptly ends. I try to call her back, but each time I get an error message. After the third try, I give up. Staring down at the green circle, I struggle to process this sudden change of events.

Bea’s not dead, not imprisoned for violating more of the protocols than I can even wrap my mind around... traveling without authorization, eloping with a man who’s not her assigned mate. I’m relieved that she’s okay, but my trust in her is shaken.

Sure, her husband is hot, and I hope they’re happy together, but the realization that she ditched me, with no warning, for a guy she just met stings. As does the fact that she’s obviously still keeping things from me...

Because her new husband wants her to.

I didn’t miss that look he gave her or the fact that she clearly censored whatever she was about to say at *his* urging. Bea claimed her connection to the network was “iffy.” But honestly, that feels like a bullshit excuse to explain why she didn’t reply to my texts.

Because the Lethe network is utterly stable, and it encompasses the entire globe. There *are* no dead spots and there haven’t been since the tech moved away from unreliable mechanisms like cellular signals and Wi-Fi coverage. Armanonia may be a backwater compared to Elonia, but there’s no reason why her Lethe shouldn’t work there.

Bea, Lora, and I have always been super close, like sisters. Any major decision, I'd usually run by them. My trust in their judgment is absolute. Or at least it was...

I consider calling Lora. So far, I've avoided telling her about Bea's disappearing act, not wanting to worry her until I had something more concrete to share. Well, now I definitely have something more concrete, but Lora's from Appleonia, which is in the same time zone as Las Vegas. It's too early.

Besides, I'm twenty-one years old. Do I really need to make major life decisions by committee? Especially when clicking "confirm" should be a no-brainer. Without a match, without a mate, only the darkest of futures awaits me. And yet...

Bea did ask me to wait. But she also ditched me for a guy and is keeping secrets from me at that guy's behest. Non-state-sanctioned religious sects are against the protocols. But I'm beginning to wonder whether Bea has been drawn into a cult operating out of the Lotus, one that's somehow flown beneath the government's radar. Because Bea's made it clear that the protocols apparently mean nothing to her now.

I don't have that luxury, not as a praefect's daughter. A praefect whose second wife is the most vindictive woman in all of Elonia. The algorithm *glitched*. I don't need to understand how or why. All I need to do is embrace the reprieve I've been granted, even if it does piss off Bea.

Besides, if I'm being honest, she's not the real reason I'm hesitating. No, stupid as it is, I'm still hung up on that kiss. A kiss from a man who *has* rejected me.

He didn't even tell me his name. Not that it would have mattered if he had. Mates are assigned, not selected on impulse in the moonlight. For all I know, he already has a mate. No, he definitely does. A man so clearly high status surely has responsibilities that would preclude him from remaining single.

As do I. The time for hesitation is over. Because the truth is that ever since my mother died, I've been alone. It was nice to pretend that my two closest friends were family, but Bea's behavior shows how tenuous those sorts of relationships really are. Better to bet on the sure thing, the happy ending that the algorithm guarantees.

I click the green circle, sealing my fate.

BAEL

As usual, the witch is fashionably late. But at least she responded to my texts and agreed to meet me —after I promised our interview would involve wine. To pass the time as I wait, I observe the other patrons on the restaurant's patio.

A group of middle-aged women who've clearly already enjoyed a considerable amount of the resort's wine. A table of frat boys that the demons should have known better than to allow into the establishment without ties. A gorgeous girl engaged in conversation with a blandly attractive man.

No, not just any gorgeous girl. Alyssa. Thousands of souls pass in and out of my realm daily, but of course I'd have to encounter *her* again.

The false sun highlights her beauty even more than the moonlight did. She's a vision, one that takes my breath away and makes me instantly hard. But my attraction to her isn't the only reason I can't look away. Something's wrong.

Her body language telegraphs her discomfort. Nothing about her companion signals that she's in danger, but it's clear she'd rather be anywhere else.

What's put her so on edge? The man with her raises my hackles, but that's because he's so obviously suitable for her. Attractive, well-dressed, self-assured. Exactly the sort of educated, social-climbing career diplomat who'd be considered an ideal match for a young, polished beauty in her world.

And gods, she's beautiful. And innocent, and smart... not many mortals these days still recognize Yeats, particularly mortals from Elonia. It's probably perverse, but the ease with which she recognized him and then used another of his poems to flirt is nearly as much of a turn-on as her body.

Her body... the ease with which she melted into me, the soft weight of her in my arms, the way she slid her ass along my cock...

Fuck, I need to get a grip.

Yes, she's sexy as hell, but she's still off-limits. Thinking about exactly how sexy she is, how badly I want to fuck her, how badly I want to *bite* her, is a dangerous game.

Frowning, I attempt to solve the puzzle of her current distress instead, struggling to recall the finer points of what I know about the so-called dome world, the first of the alternate realities to come into existence when the mortal realm fractured. Fascist global government, destroyed environment, a

society comprised of colonies housed beneath climate-controlled domes. Fertility rates are low, but sexual activity is tightly controlled due to an unusually high rate of genetic abnormalities among live births.

Which is why it's frankly unusual for a virgin from that realm to set foot in mine. When she claimed to be from the capital colony the other night, I covered my surprise by commenting on her accent. But the truth is, I've met very few unchaperoned women from Elonia—and none who hadn't yet been claimed by a male. Because while that society isn't quite as grim as the one described in *The Handmaid's Tale*, it's not terribly far off. All unions are assigned by a computer program. And until that program pairs a young woman with a suitable partner, her freedom of movement is restricted.

Fucking hell. The man with her is her mate. He has to be.

And yet... she's a virgin. It was clear in her scent. So not her mate then, but her intended.

Fuck. Hecate needs to hurry up. I need a distraction, something, *anything*, to take my mind off the one woman I absolutely cannot allow myself to pursue.

Because she has a mate, and a fairly high status one by the looks of him. A *mortal* mate. A man who can give her children. Who can walk in the real sun at her side.

A man who won't be battling the temptation to kill her every night.

So what if she looks unhappy, as if she'd rather be anywhere else than at this man's side? She'll be safe with him, which is a hell of a lot more than I can promise her.

I take a deep breath, attempting to will my arousal away despite every instinct I have urging me to cross the room and claim her as mine. Beauty and innocence like that aren't for one such as I. Aphrodite made sure of that.

Time to let the dream go by, Bael. Just fucking let it go by.

ALYSSA

THE SUN SINKS into the wine-dark sea as Prince Charming blathers on. Struggling to appear engaged, I suppress a yawn. The truth is that the reality of finally meeting my assigned mate isn't living up to my expectations.

Oh, the fancy restaurant with its outdoor seating and strands of fairy lights at sunset fits the fantasy well enough. The delicious food paired with the perfect wine is pretty great too, and the dress I'm wearing is like something out of a fairy tale. It's just my companion who bores me to tears.

I know I'm being unfair. When I explained that I needed to remain here a bit longer to wait for Bea, he came all the way to Las Vegas just to see me. Doesn't that prove his devotion and bode well for our future together? And yet...

I'm starting to wonder whether the algorithm messed up more than I understood, whether I should have listened to Bea. Is this really who I'm going to wake up next to every day? Is this the man I'm supposed to spend the rest of my life with?

My reservations are petty and childish. I know this. I should be ecstatic that I'm finally with my perfect match, outside of espaces and conversing in person.

Well, if this lecture counts as a conversation. It bugs me that all I seem to need to do is smile and nod in the right places. I gave up on following his tedious account of a dinner party in Appleonia fifteen minutes ago. You'd think that my lack of interest would be something that my perfect mate would at least *notice*. But no, Prince Charming seems more than content to simply ramble on.

Ugh, I really need to stop calling him "Prince Charming" in my head. Even if Alex looks and acts way too much like a cardboard cutout of a hero out of a children's story. Tall, fair, handsome, all practiced smiles and light, he's the polar opposite of the man who kissed me.

The man whose lips I can still taste.

My pulse speeds up at the memory of that night, and my hand reflexively goes to my throat, touching the spot where he kissed me as I shift uncomfortably on my chair.

"I know!" Alex exclaims, misinterpreting my agitation. "I couldn't believe that the old bat had the nerve to seat me next to her daughter either."

I smile weakly. “Well, you can’t blame an ambitious mother for hoping that forcing you two into proximity might have nudged the algorithm into declaring her your match.”

Alex frowns. “Well, yes, I *am* quite a catch. I expect a beauty like you can’t be bothered with filling her head with the minutiae of the protocols. But the algorithm doesn’t match women who’ve been rejected, dearest, so really it was just pure desperation on Lady Ecklehart’s part.”

I’m unsure whether I should feel relieved or roll my eyes, so I simply nod and say, “Of course it was. Utterly unforgivable as well. However did you respond to such an insult?”

Ugh, that was a close one. If Alex had a higher estimation of my intelligence, he’d have realized that I hadn’t been paying attention. Because *of course I know* that women don’t get a second chance at being matched. I’d have to be a freaking moron not to have absorbed that basic fact since it determines the fates of all of my sex.

Still, it’s probably better that he think me dumb rather than rude. Because I *am* being rude. Sure, I couldn’t care less about the dinner party he won’t shut up about, but some people babble when they’re nervous. It’s unfair for me to be judging him so harshly.

The algorithm doesn’t make mistakes. And on paper, we’re a perfect match. Surely chemistry will develop between us once we get to know each other. It’s only in fairy tales where two people meet and fall instantly in love, unable to keep their hands off each other.

In the real world, men don’t recite dead poetry in moonlit gardens. And they don’t kiss you within five minutes of meeting you. Comparing Alex to that dark, enigmatic stranger is both stupid and unfair. Even if he did have eyes I wanted to lose myself in...

As if my thoughts conjured him, he appears. Across the patio. The man from the garden is sitting alone at a table for two—watching me.

Our eyes meet and my face heats. Because his gaze is positively smoldering, as if he’s mentally undressing me from across the room.

“Alyssa, dear, are you all right? You look a little flushed.”

I force my gaze back to poor Alex. To his credit, he does appear genuinely concerned. What the hell is wrong with me that I don’t respond to *him* this way?

Smart, successful, attractive, he should check all the boxes. So why does he leave me utterly cold?

“Sorry, I’m fine.” I shake my head. “This is just all so *exciting*, actually meeting you in person after dreaming about this day for so long.”

“It is gratifying to hear that I excite your girlish passions. But do try to get ahold of yourself. I was just about to get to the best part—the costume ball.”

As Alex describes the “devilishly clever” costume worn by the wife of a senior diplomat, my gaze wanders back to Mr. Tall, Dark, and Gorgeous.

Our eyes meet briefly once more, but then he turns his brooding gaze away, fixing it on the stunning woman who’s drawing stares as she makes her way across the restaurant—and straight for his table.

Short black hair, the kind of effortlessly messy look that is anything *but* effortless. High cheekbones, pouting lips, beguiling blue eyes set off by dark eyeliner, and a little black dress that emphasizes a killer figure.

As a couple, they're compelling. He stands and pulls out her chair. Despite her dangerously high heels, she's still shorter than him. I watch as she tilts her head up and says something that makes him laugh. My stomach clenches as she places a hand on his arm before taking her seat.

I try to turn my attention back to Alex, but the memory of the stranger's parting words to me drowns out everything else.

Innocent child, gorgeous fool...

Because it's clear now that I *have* been a fool, endlessly replaying a moment that clearly meant nothing. How could it have if he has a mate who looks like *that*, a woman who's anything but a child? Polished, sophisticated, and clearly more than a little bit wild—in short, a woman who's everything I'm not.

And even if he weren't taken, it would be madness to throw away what I have right here in front of me, to turn my back on the future the algorithm promises me. So what if we've gotten off to a rocky start? Comparing him to a stranger I kissed once is both immature and stupid.

Sure, Bea may be claiming to have found happiness by running off and marrying a stranger. And for her sake, I hope it works out, but I can't be that reckless.

Because the science is clear. Arranged marriages create greater social stability and promise increased happiness and marital satisfaction long term. That's why they were added to the protocols.

Besides, I don't need science to tell me what I already know from studying mythology—relationships based on something as intangible as chemistry rarely lead to happy endings. The myths are littered with women whose lives were ruined by uncontrolled passions—Leda, Helen, Ariadne, Persephone, the list is endless.

And that's all that kiss was—uncontrolled passion, mindless lust, a mistake.

Take a kiss for what a kiss is worth.

Seeing how enamored Mr. Tall, Dark, and Gorgeous is with his companion has shown me exactly what a kiss is worth—absolutely nothing.

BAEL

I FORCE my focus to remain, at least outwardly, on the witch. But the sight of Alyssa in the dying daylight is burned into my mind.

It's difficult not to stare at the temptation that sits a scant few tables away, but the last thing I want to do is draw Hecate's attention to her. So I slowly sip my wine as the witch describes my brother's wedding ceremony in excruciating detail. Yet I can't forget the hurt look in Alyssa's eyes earlier when her gaze met mine.

Still, I'm determined to try. Both because I have no other choice and because my focus needs to be on the witch and on finding out what she knows. I've never seriously considered trying to break the curse. In fact, I vowed to never try. Or at least I vowed to never perform the ritual, which is allegedly the only way *to* break it. But I can't stop thinking about the three words my dad texted: *Dante is cured*. What the hell did he mean by that?

Because while Dante has had no qualms about performing the ritual, it's never worked. Did he find another way?

Drinking mortal wine feels like a performative waste of time, but I've learned that a bottle of Chateau Lafite often improves Hecate's mood. And since my father has remained stubbornly silent since his last cryptic text, Chateau Lafite it is—even if it takes half a dozen bottles to loosen her tongue, which it very well might. I've watched her drink the twins under the table.

Although she already seems chatty enough after a single glass of wine, which makes me wonder how much she drank before coming here. Unfortunately, she's hung up on details I couldn't care less about. As she starts to launch into a story about a post-nuptial drinking game that she and Dante's bride played with Dad, I interrupt her.

“So Dante really broke the curse?”

“Of course he did. I've been saying he could all along, and I'm never wrong when it comes to magic.” Hecate fixes her storm-tossed blue eyes on me. “But I haven't gotten to that part of the story yet. How did you know?”

I shrug. “Dad texted me yesterday.” I don't bother adding that he's refused to reply to any of my follow-up texts requesting more information. “But I need details.”

She takes a sip of her wine. “Details you could have just as easily gotten by coming out to Crete yourself.”

“Unlike the rest of you, I can’t just jet off to Greece. Not when I have a resort to run. But if the curse can be broken, I need to know how.”

“Work is all you ever think about.” The witch shakes her head. “It’s ridiculous that you’re still here when you should be at your villa, congratulating your brother.”

“How did he break the curse, Hecate?”

She rolls her eyes. “How do you think? He performed the ritual, and it *worked*.”

My stomach sinks. Her answer is the one I expected, but not the one I wanted to hear. As irrational as it was, I’d been hoping she’d say something like, “I brewed a new potion, and he was magically cured.” But of course the reality isn’t that simple, but then reality rarely is. Real life isn’t a fairy tale, not even for cursed gods. Especially not for us.

Sure, Dante broke the curse. And I’m fucking thrilled for him. But it took him how many centuries of failures to find the one woman who was able to survive? No thanks.

Interrupting my pity party, Hecate says, “Gods, from your expression, you’d think I’d said the ritual *failed*. Bael, can’t you see that this is major? The fucking whore’s curse can be broken!”

Having learned at a young age not to needlessly provoke my mom’s best friend, I keep my voice carefully neutral as I say, “We knew that all along.”

“Dante’s right,” she mutters. “You have ice water in your veins.” She glares at me for a moment, then downs the wine remaining in her glass before reaching for the bottle and discovering it empty. Sighing, she summons a second bottle with a wave of her hand.

“Someone in this family needs to keep a level head,” I reply, refusing to be stung by her barb.

“Hey! Is that who I think it is?” Hecate asks, voice laced with excitement.

I follow her gaze over to where an overweight man in a sequined jumpsuit sits morosely staring at an untouched fried peanut butter, banana, and bacon sandwich.

“Elvis? Yeah.” I shrug. “Bribed Dad to give him a six-month pass aboveground. Worst deal I ever made. Turns out the mortals prefer the demon impersonators over the shade.”

“He looks so sad. You didn’t bother to tell him he wouldn’t be able to touch mortal fare?” She shakes her head. “Poor man, you really are cruel to exploit shades like that, Bael. You should know better.”

I roll my eyes. “How was I supposed to know that he only agreed to the contract because he missed the damn sandwiches? Goes to show, though, that mortals never change. Gluttons in life become gluttons in the afterlife.”

Hecate shoots me a disapproving look, but all she says is, “Speaking of gluttony, some of us actually prefer our meals in non-liquid form.”

She snaps her fingers, and a menu appears. I roll my eyes when I realize that she's conjured the dessert list rather than the regular menu.

For half a minute, she reads it in silence, then asks, "Can I safely assume that the tarte Normandy doesn't contain real apples?"

I sigh. While I offer my guests many amenities and vices, that particular fruit is off-limits. Permanently. A fact Hecate well knows, which means she's baiting me.

"You know it doesn't," I say, hoping she'll drop the subject.

Because Hecate also knows what I don't bother adding—no guests with a fondness for that fruit will notice the omission. While I offer many vices outright, the beauty of the Lotus's enchantments is that they provide the illusion of what each guest desires most. If only my own cravings could be fooled so easily.

The witch shakes her head. "Ugh, you're such a control freak. They're *apples*. Totally harmless. Yet you're too neurotic to even allow applesauce on the buffets—which I'll note for the zillionth time is completely fucking irrational."

I catch a brief flash of movement out of the corner of my eye as Alyssa and her mate leave the restaurant, his hand resting possessively on her arm. And maybe it's that, watching the woman I can't get out of my head walking out of my life on another man's arm, that causes me to give in to Hecate's goading.

"The apple question isn't up for debate," I snap. "They're the fruit of chaos. Look at Troy. Not to mention that whole sad affair with Eve. Then there was Atalanta's defeat—"

"How does it feel to be too literal minded to understand the difference between metaphor and a harmless fucking fruit?" She rolls her eyes. "I told him his plan wouldn't work. You're too much of a control freak—and too goddamn paranoid about fruit."

My stomach drops. Hoping that she doesn't mean the "him" I think she does, I ask, "You told who *what*?"

"Hades. Moron actually wanted to try the Snow White gambit." She giggles and pours herself another glass of wine. "But don't worry. I told him it's too risky. Not to mention you aren't as gullible as Dante. Well, usually. I guess you did both fall for that horse shit about the pomegranate seeds."

I stare at Hecate in silence for a moment, trying to wrap my mind around her drunken disclosure. How are the pomegranate seeds that trapped my mom in Hades "horse shit"? But more importantly...

"What the fuck is the Snow White gambit?"

ALYSSA

WHILE I'M sure the restaurant's dessert selection would have blown my mind, I'm relieved that Alex so easily acceded to my request to take a walk along the "beach" instead. It's childish, but I couldn't stand another second of watching Mr. Tall, Dark, and Gorgeous flirt with his stunning companion.

We pause when we reach the water's edge so I can slip out of my heels. The perfect gentleman, Alex carries my shoes for me as we make our way along the shore.

As he resumes his story, I can't help but watch the continued spectacle of the sun's slow descent into the ocean. Inhaling the salt-tinged air, I try to be grateful that I'm experiencing such beauty with my mate at my side. Better to focus on that than the upcoming drab reality of returning to the colonies where I'll live the life of a diplomat's wife, making the rounds of endless dinner parties and costume balls.

But my improved mood evaporates as a sudden sharp pain in my right foot causes me to cry out. I inadvertently interrupt the steady rhythm of Alex's story with a string of expletives. Pausing, I tear my gaze away from the setting sun and examine my foot to find it bleeding. Lying on the beach beside me is a conch shell, half-buried in the sand. A drop of blood gleams on one of its spines.

Alex kneels down and inspects my foot. "Not as bad as I feared from your, err, colorful language. But we still should probably turn back and get it checked out."

Sighing, I agree, and we turn back toward the resort. We haven't gone far, however, when a voice calls out, "Trinket for the young lady?"

Several yards down the shoreline, a woman who can't be much older than me pushes a small wooden cart. Even from this distance, her beauty is obvious. Her hair is styled in intricate braids that set off delicate, aristocratic features. As we draw closer, she waves and repeats her question.

Alex turns toward me. "I suppose it can't hurt to take a look at what she has."

I'm not particularly in the mood for shopping. But I'm also not in a hurry to limp through the restaurant, past Mr. Tall, Dark, and Gorgeous and his sophisticated mate. So I nod and follow Alex over to the woman and her cart.

Up close, I can read the hand-lettered sign on the cart: "Cal's Curios." Curios, however, feels like an insufficient term to describe her wares. Dozens of pieces of silver jewelry inlaid with precious gems

are spread out on a black-brocade cloth. Entranced by the objects on display before me, the pain in my foot fades into a faint memory.

“These are fabulous,” I say, reaching out to touch a particularly appealing necklace.

“Careful, dearest,” the woman warns, causing me to pull my hand back. “Be sure a piece is truly your heart’s desire first. Some of these objects have a mind of their own.”

What an odd statement, although it’s most likely an act. This woman is surely just another resort employee playing a part like the waitstaff in the various themed restaurants. Still, I’m at a loss as to how to respond, so I simply continue to peruse the objects on offer in silence, resisting the impulse to pick any of them up for closer inspection.

“Does anything strike your fancy, dear?” Alex asks.

I can’t help but notice that his gaze is fixed on the woman and her beguiling form rather than her wares. But I really can’t fault him for it. There’s something strangely compelling about her.

“I’m not sure,” I admit. “They’re all so beautiful that it’s hard to choose.”

But at that moment, a strong breeze comes off the ocean, whipping my hair into my eyes. As I push it back in frustration, the woman smiles.

“Ah, I think I know just what you need,” she says, pointing to a set of silver hair combs, the kind of combs women once wore as hair accessories, not the styling tool.

The objects in question are fashioned in the shape of seashells and inlaid with aquamarine gemstones. From the moment she points them out, I know that I have to have them.

Alex has already taken his Lethe out, but I shake my head. “No, those have to be way too expensive. I can pay for them myself,” I say, unzipping my handbag.

“Alyssa, darling, don’t be ridiculous. Soon enough our finances and our fortunes will be joined.”

I’m about to argue when the woman intervenes. “My curios aren’t for sale.”

At this, Alex’s face turns red. “Well then why did you bother us if you had no intention of selling them?”

She shakes her head. “You misunderstand. Some things are without price. If the young lady desires the combs, they are hers.”

There’s something off about her statement, but before I can consider why exactly it troubles me, the breeze off the water picks up again, blowing my hair back into my face.

“If she won’t accept payment, we may as well just take them, dear,” Alex says, picking up the combs. “We need to be on our way, anyway, and get that foot taken care of.”

Before I can reply, he brushes my hair back and pins it in place with the silver combs, one at each temple. I turn to the woman to thank her, but when I try to speak, I discover that my tongue is thick and heavy. Formulating words suddenly feels impossible. And then everything starts to spin as the rushing roar of the ocean fills my head.

BAEL

TO MY FRUSTRATION, the witch insists on ordering dessert before answering my question. She then wanders off to chat with Elvis until the waiter returns with her crème brûlée. Finally, though, a demon delivers her dessert, and she saunters back to our table, slow as molasses.

I don't bother standing this time. Let the witch pull out her own chair.

As she takes her seat, I snap, "Well? Are you through stalling?"

She takes a bite of her custard before replying. "I'm not stalling. I'm not obligated to tell you anything. Just as I wasn't obligated to answer any of your needy texts. Let alone leave the party to enable your shitty work-life balance."

I roll my eyes. "Yeah, I'm sure Dante loves having you as a third wheel on his honeymoon."

"He was asleep for over a century. He *wants* to catch up with his friends and family. Just because you have an iceberg for a heart—"

"It was your goddamn fault that he slept that long!"

"And it's my 'goddamn fault' that he woke up too."

I raise an eyebrow. "So now you're taking credit for Beatrice's kiss? That's rich."

She shakes her head. "No, fang boy, I'm taking credit for bringing them together. If I hadn't hacked into that stupid algorithm her government uses and pulled a few other strings..." She covers her mouth with her hand and giggles.

I stare at the witch, the sense of misgiving I'd been feeling since Hecate mentioned the "Snow White gambit" growing. Fuck. I'd forgotten that Dante's bride was from the dome world. When I'd thought he'd killed her, I pulled up her reservation information, preparing to engage in damage control with the mortal authorities. Thankfully, that turned out to be unnecessary.

But as I slowly recall the details of her reservation, my sense of misgiving threatens to turn into full-blown panic. "There was a second guest listed on Beatrice's reservation. You wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you?"

The witch smiles. “Gods, you boys are so slow sometimes. Finally connecting the dots? Don’t think I didn’t notice you staring at her earlier. Like I said, I’m *never* wrong about magic.”

“I thought you said you hacked—”

“Sir, forgive the intrusion, but there’s an, err, ‘situation’ down at the shore.”

I glare at the demon who’s had the temerity to interrupt me mid-sentence. “What kind of ‘situation’ would that be?”

“A resort guest appears to be in medical distress,” the demon replies, voice uneasy.

I frown. “Well, that’s unfortunate, but what do you expect me to do? Summon a medic.”

“A medical team is already there, sir, as is security.” The demon lowers its voice. “But when they first responded, a sorceress was observed fleeing the scene. And the head medic has reason to believe that the guest has been cursed. Or poisoned. She isn’t quite sure.”

Hecate’s spoon falls to the floor. “Fuck, I didn’t think he’d actually call my bluff and bring in another witch.”

“You thought he wouldn’t bring in another witch to do *what*? ”

Ignoring my question, Hecate turns to the demon. “Did they say which sorceress?”

The demon swallows hard. “Calypso, my lady.”

The witch’s face is pale. For a long moment she just stares at me, eyes wide. But then she shakes her head and pushes back her chair.

Standing, she says, “We can stand here and have a heart to heart, fang boy, or you can get off your ass and save the girl.”

Hecate doesn’t need to tell me twice. Adrenaline coursing through my veins, I’m already weaving through the tables toward the patio’s edge. Moving faster than the eyes of the mortal guests can track, I don’t bother with the stairs, vaulting over the railing and sprinting down to the beach.

A few yards from the shore, I slow my pace, taking in the crowd of mortals that has already gathered. Hecate stands a few feet off, to the left of the crowd, inspecting a wooden cart that appears abandoned.

She rolls her eyes as I approach. “I can’t believe you just *ran* down here like a goddamn mortal. Have you forgotten everything I taught you?”

I ignore her insult as my gaze lands on several pieces of silver jewelry lying on the sand near the cart. The surf washes over the scattered objects, which glimmer in the fading light. One in particular, an aquamarine ring, calls to me.

But as I’m bending down to retrieve it, the toe of the witch’s stiletto sandal covers it. I look up from her manicured toenails to find her glaring down at me.

“Apparently, you *have* forgotten everything I taught you. Have you lost your goddamn mind? Let *me* clean up the magical mess. Go deal with the mortals.” Under her breath she adds, “It’s the only thing you’re any good for.”

Hecate’s attitude is tiresome, but she’s right. What the fuck *was* I thinking? Shaking my head, I break free from the pull of the cursed jewelry. But when I push my way through the crowd of mortals, two facts confront me.

The first is that the guest “experiencing medical distress” *is* Alyssa. She lies on the sand, lashes dark against skin white as snow, her ebony hair fanned out beneath her. The rose red of her lips is the only spot of color on her deathly pale countenance.

The second is that she’s bleeding. The scent of her blood intermingles with the salt-tinged ocean air. Fuck. The wound doesn’t appear to be too bad—a mere laceration on her foot, one that is bleeding profusely, yes, but a superficial wound that’s unlikely to kill her. No, the issue is that the scent of her blood pushes the limits of my self-control.

Alyssa’s companion from the restaurant stands off to one side, conversing quietly with two security demons. A female medic crouches on the sand beside Alyssa, a roll of gauze in one hand as she prepares to bandage the wound on her foot.

Kneeling beside Alyssa’s unnaturally still form, I clasp one of her hands in mine. It’s ice cold. She’s still breathing, but barely.

I turn to the medic. “What’s wrong with her?”

But before the medic can respond, Alyssa’s companion walks over. “Who are you?”

I nearly snap, “That’s none of your goddamn business,” but then I remember where I am, *who* I am.

Taking a deep breath, I offer the man an urbane smile. “Apologies. I’m Bael Styx, the proprietor of this resort. My staff alerted me that one of our guests was in medical distress. And as I have some medical training...” I trail off, not bothering to speak the rest of the lie, counting on the unspoken suggestion behind my words to overcome the man’s distrust.

I watch with relief as his jaw slackens. He nods, then takes a step back. I turn my focus back to the medic. “Well?” I repeat my question. “What in Hades is wrong with the girl?”

The medic finishes bandaging Alyssa’s foot before replying. “I don’t know, sir. Her vitals are dangerously irregular. But her communications device contains no medical alerts, nor any history of allergies or preexisting conditions. A few of her symptoms suggest a jellyfish sting, but there’s no swelling and her companion informs me that she cut her foot on a shell.” The medic shrugs. “He also claims she was conversing normally and then abruptly fainted. Putting it all together, the only conclusion I can arrive at is that she was either cursed or poisoned. And as security spotted the sorceress Calypso fleeing the scene...”

But just as I’m processing this information, Hecate pushes her way through the crowd. The sight of the witch snaps me out of my inaction. I scoop Alyssa up from the sand and stand.

Cradling her unconscious form against my chest, I will my fangs not to descend. Despite the bandage, I can still smell her blood. If not for that, I'd fear she was dead. She's so still in my arms, nearly lifeless save for the slow rise and fall of her chest.

"Hey! Get your hands off my fiancée!" her companion protests, the lingering effects of my hypnotic suggestion weakened by my divided attention.

Ignoring him, I look at Hecate, helpless.

The witch draws nearer, and in a voice too low for Alyssa's companion to hear, mutters, "Get her out of here. Once you're alone with her—and *only* once you're alone—remove the combs from her hair."

"Help security deal with the girl's fiancé and the other mortal witnesses," I reply in equally low tones.

"I'm not one of your employees, fang boy. Just get her the fuck out of here. You don't have much time."

I'm tempted to stay and argue, but Alyssa's unnatural stillness unnerves me. So hoping Hecate is telling the truth about the combs, I close my eyes and focus on the penthouse.

My eyes open to a panoramic view of the Vegas skyline. I murmur a spell to turn on the lights. Then laying Alyssa's still form on one of the sofas, I kneel beside her.

Gods, she's so still. Were it not for her scent and the barely perceptible thud of her heart, I really would think her dead. With shaking hands, I remove the ornate silver combs from her hair and shove them into my pocket. Then I take one of her ice-cold hands in my own and wait, praying that the witch was right.

For a long moment, nothing changes. But gradually, the color returns to her face and her breathing deepens. A moment later, she opens her eyes.

I squeeze her hand. "Everything's all right. You're safe now," I reassure her, hoping that it's true.

But now that the immediate threat to her safety has passed, I'm finding myself once again distracted by the scent of her blood. My gaze drifts inadvertently from her face to her bandaged foot, bright spots of crimson dotting the white gauze.

I force myself to look away, staring into her eyes instead. The temptation that hits me when her gaze meets mine is different, but nearly as strong.

Looking up at me, she asks, "What are you?"

Not *who* am I, but *what*.

What can I say? I can nearly hear her screams now were I to inform her that a blood-drinking monster is holding her hand.

Her hand. A hand I'm not worthy to touch given the unspeakable things I want to do to her. And so I pull my hand away from hers, but other than that, I don't move.

Logic says I should lie. Lie and alter her memories if need be. And yet I hesitate, finding that I don't want to lie to this woman who quoted Yeats to me in the moonlight and who's looking up at me now with such serious and solemn eyes.

ALYSSA

I SHOULD BE SCARED. Because I'm alone with... well, I still don't know exactly what this man is other than clearly not human. The fangs give that away.

But somehow, I'm not frightened. If anything, I'm aroused. The same scent I smelled in the maze fills the room, and I can feel my body responding to it. Why does this man have to smell so good?

Maybe when I fainted, I hit my head. Because I'm dizzy too. Dizzy and turned on, an unsettling combination.

Head still spinning, I repeat my question, determined to have an answer. "What *are* you?"

He buries his face in his hands, and I can't decide whether Mr. Tall, Dark, and Gorgeous looks like a little boy about to be scolded or a wounded animal caught in a trap. What I do know is that his muscles are tense, and he looks as if he's about to run.

But as whatever wooziness overcame me on the beach fades and the full weirdness of this situation hits me, his silence begins to irritate me. This guy may be stupidly hot, but why am I alone with him? And where *are* we?

Voice stronger, I demand, "Actually, not just what, but *who* are you? And where the hell have you taken me?"

I sit up and swing my feet down onto the floor, wincing when I remember my cut foot. My foot has been bandaged—but by who? Mr. Tall, Dark, and Gorgeous, this fanged stranger who smells way too good?

Lifting his face from his hands, he stands and steps backward. The set of fangs I swear I saw just a moment ago are gone, as if I imagined them. I stare at the man standing before me. My arousal goes up another notch when I realize that he's as turned on as I feel.

Well, at least if that bulge in his dress pants is any indication. My mouth goes dry.

But aroused or not, Mr. Tall, Dark, and Gorgeous's voice is calm and collected when he finally answers, belying both the bulge in his pants and the tension practically radiating off him in waves.

"I'm Bael Styx, and you're in the penthouse of the Lotus... which I own. So you see, it *was* my pool that we met beside."

Head clearer now, I fully take in my surroundings. Penthouse. Sure, that checks out. The spacious living room we're in is too large to belong to any guest room. But wait, why am I in his apartment?

And why can't I recall what happened? One moment I was on the beach with Alex and that merchant, then everything became strange, and I felt as if I were a million miles away...

"Where's Alex?"

A look I can't decipher flashes across his face, but all he says is, "Your fiancé will be fine. My... friend will see that he's taken care of."

My mind flashes back to the sophisticated woman dining with him in the restaurant. He honestly expects me to believe that they're "just friends"? And I didn't miss his hesitation there, there's something he's not saying. And he still hasn't answered my question. What the hell is going on here?

Because I did *not* imagine those fangs. Did I?

"What are you, Bael Styx? A vampire?"

To my surprise, he nearly looks *relieved* at this. "Vampire is a bit of an oversimplification," he says, "but basically, yeah."

I pat the sofa cushion next to me. "Sit," I say, my voice more confident than I feel. But I need to wrap my head around what's going on here, and having him standing there staring down at me is making me uncomfortable—because even if his fangs have disappeared, I'm struggling not to stare at that bulge in his pants.

Maybe I have a concussion. But I've never heard of horniness being a side effect of hitting your head.

As Bael joins me on the couch, I notice that he keeps as much space between us as possible, as if I were the predator, not him.

I frown. "What do you mean by 'basically'?"

He sighs. "It's a long story, but my vampirism isn't naturally occurring. It's the result of a curse."

Suddenly, his comment in the garden about curses makes sense. But all I say is, "Wait, you're telling me there are multiple kinds of vampires? Ones that are cursed like you and, uh, 'naturally occurring' ones? Who are what, born that way?"

He shakes his head. "If Bram Stoker, Hollywood-type vampires exist, I've never met one. And I've been around a long time."

I consider this for a moment, then say, "So you're telling me you're the only one?"

"No. My brothers were afflicted by the same curse."

"How?"

"So many questions." He smiles ruefully. "The short version is that our parents pissed off the wrong goddess."

“Which goddess?” I ask automatically, my mind already running through the likely suspects from the myths.

“Ah, yes, I’d nearly forgotten that you were a mythology major.” He shrugs. “Not that it matters, but it was Aphrodite.”

Vampirism, curses, freaking Aphrodite...

For a moment, I start to wonder if I’m hallucinating because his life sounds like a soap opera. Cursed by the goddess of love? Although if I *am* hallucinating, this is a pretty involved hallucination.

“So this curse must have happened a long time ago,” I say, trying to piece the bigger picture together, struggling to focus on the intellectual puzzle before me rather than the inexplicable attraction I still feel toward this... well, whatever the hell he is.

One thing I do know is that this conversation shouldn’t be making me wet. But I am. What the hell is wrong with me? I’m alone with a man who’s just confessed to being a *vampire*, and all I can think about is what it felt like when he kissed me and how badly I want him to do it again?

Bael tilts his head to one side. “It did happen long ago, but why do you say that?”

“Well, because you said Aphrodite cursed you. Hellenism fell out of fashion around the ninth century.”

At this, Bael laughs.

“What’s so funny?” I demand.

He shakes his head. “You’re just such a... classicist.” He laughs harder. “You didn’t blink when I claimed Aphrodite cursed me because, unlike most modern mortals, you believe in the Greek myths, correct?”

Well, saying I *believe in* the myths is an oversimplification, but... yeah, I guess I do. I nod.

He continues. “And yet despite believing in them, you also operate under the assumption that they’re ancient history, an abstraction for you to study, safely locked in the past.”

“So you’re saying that they aren’t? That you were cursed *recently*?”

Once more, he shakes his head. “Not at all. I was cursed well before the ninth century.”

I sigh. “I’m afraid I still don’t get the joke.”

“Do I look like ancient history to you?” he asks.

No, he doesn’t look ancient at all. In all honesty, he doesn’t appear to be a day over thirty. And when he kissed me, well... the muscular arms that held me didn’t feel ancient, nor did his cock, for that matter. I feel my face heat at the memory of his arousal pressing against me.

Focus on his face, Alyssa. Don’t you dare stare at his package.

When I don’t reply, he adds, “You’re sharing a sofa with a god, love.”

“You said you were a vampire, not a god,” I protest, mainly to distract myself from my awareness that he isn’t actually *that* far away. It would take so little to close the distance between us...

“I said I was *basically* a vampire.” He shrugs. “I was a god first, though, and I’m still a god. How else do you think I pull off the illusions this place runs on?”

Illusions... so I was both right and wrong about the Lotus. The resort *is* dangerous but not because it’s filled with virtual reality simulations but actual magic.

“Which god are you?”

At this, he looks perplexed. “Umm, I’m me? Who else would I be?”

I shake my head. “I’ve studied everything there is to know about Hellenism, including most of the original source materials. There’s no Greek god named Bael. A Semitic demon, sure, but no gods.”

He smiles. “Because your mortal texts aren’t comprehensive, sweetheart. None of my brothers made it into the myths either. I assume because it would have detracted from the sexier story of our parents’ tumultuous affair.”

There’s a sibilance to the way he says “sexier” that has my mind once again wandering places it shouldn’t. Because god or not, he still has a mate. As do I, at least for all intents and purposes.

“Who are your parents?”

“We should get you back to your fiancé before I do something we’ll both regret. I’m a god, not a saint.”

He starts to stand. On impulse, I grab his wrist, pulling him back down beside me.

“Please.” Pulling his arm away, he shakes his head. “Don’t do this.”

I’m about to ask what “this” is when I see that his fangs are once again visible. Unable to resist, I reach out and touch one. I’m unsure what I was expecting, but all I feel is an ordinary tooth, albeit a sharp one.

Flinching, he closes his eyes, expression pained as if my touch hurt him. He breathes deeply for a moment that feels like an eternity, then opens his eyes.

“Alyssa...” he begins, voice hoarse. “Your hand.”

Confused, I hold my hands in front of my face, palms facing out. Both appear fine. I shoot him a quizzical look.

“Your fingertip. You... it’s...” he trails off.

I turn my palms toward me. A single drop of blood blooms on my index finger, barely more than a pinprick.

“It’s fine.” I shrug. “Barely a scratch.”

Not answering, he takes my hand, holding it flat against his palm, staring transfixed at the drop of blood. As in the maze, it feels as if an electric current passes between us.

He bites his bottom lip, fangs on full display. And suddenly I understand.

I understand not just what he wants from me, but that he'll never ask.

Not stopping to consider the consequences, I pull my hand away, then press my finger against his bottom lip. He moans as the digit slides into his mouth.

The sensation of him sucking on my finger is indescribable. It shouldn't turn me on this much, but somehow, it does. Because as his tongue laves the tip, I feel the same need, the same desire for *more*, that I felt in the garden. Again, there's a sensation of a current passing between us—a circuit that can only be completed in one way.

Staring up into his eyes, I feel as if I'm falling. I slide across the couch and into his lap, straddling him. The skirt of my dress rides up and nothing is between me and that hard bulge except for the thin fabric of his suit pants and the even thinner material of my underwear.

Feeling wanton, reckless, but unable to resist, I rock my hips and let out a small moan as his hardness presses against me. I pull my finger out of his mouth and place both of my hands on his shoulders.

"Please," I whisper. "I want you to." I tilt my head back, exposing my neck.

Closing my eyes, I wait.

The muscles of his shoulders are tense beneath my hands. And for a moment I think he won't, that I've misunderstood and just made a fool out of myself. Heart racing, I wait for him to laugh—or worse.

But then he's brushing my hair aside. His arms tighten around me as he kisses my neck. The sensation is amazing, but it's so gentle at first that I start to wonder whether he has willfully misunderstood and only intends to tease me with kisses.

Any doubts I had about his understanding or intentions, however, are dispelled in the next moment by a sharp, piercing pain. I cry out. His fangs hurt more than I expected. But then the pain subsides and is replaced by... bliss.

No other word can describe the perfection of this sensation. In truth, it's a pleasure beyond words.

I've never felt more turned on, more alive. But more than that, I've never felt this *close* to someone. It's as if we're connected on a level that's deeper than the reality of his lips pressed against my neck. Deeper than skin and bone. The connection feels cellular, molecular even.

I've never been so aware of my body, yet utterly outside of it. His lips on my neck are pure fire. I'm painfully aware of every place where our bodies touch, of how hard he still is beneath me. And yet I also feel as if I'm being drawn out of my body and deep into a world that he's somehow creating as he drinks my blood.

It's everything and yet somehow still not enough. I want—no, I *need*—to be closer to this man. My whole body is on fire, desperate for more... more everything, more of *him*. My core aches with the need for him to fill me...

A drawling female voice shatters the dream. “I told you to remove the combs, fang boy, not to drain the girl dry.”

ALYSSA

COOL AIR HITS my sensitized skin as Bael lifts his mouth from my neck. I open my eyes to find the woman from the restaurant watching us from the other side of the room, frowning with disapproval. My face heats as I push down the skirt of my dress.

With fluid movements too quick for my eyes to follow, Bael manages to shift our positions until we're sitting on opposite sides of the sofa. I feel a brief pang of loss at the distance he's placed between us.

Voice calm, he says, "Alyssa, allow me to introduce you to Hecate."

I look from Bael to the frowning woman. "The queen of the witches is your mate?"

At this, Hecate's frown is replaced by a wide grin. Laughing, she steps farther into the room, taking a seat on the sofa opposite us.

"While you get points for using my proper title, please don't insult me, child. I have better taste in paramours than a workaholic vampire whose diapers I helped change."

She's not his mate.

My hand goes to my neck, touching the spot where Bael bit me. Hecate shoots me a knowing wink, and I look away. But Bael's next words distract me from my embarrassment.

"So? Did you manage to track down Calypso?" he demands, voice impatient.

Hecate rolls her eyes. "You instructed me to deal with the mortals—which I did. Besides, that bitch is likely back on Ogygia by now." She shakes her head. "I still can't believe the old goat had the nerve to free her, even temporarily, to do his dirty work."

Cal's Curios... Calypso, the sorceress who seduced Odysseus. What the hell rabbit hole have I fallen down? But then Bael speaks, causing me to forget all about Calypso.

"So Alyssa's fiancé's memories have been modified, then, and we can safely return her?"

Crap. Alex. What does it say about me that I so easily forgot about him and shamelessly threw myself at another man? But also...

"Excuse me, but did you just say that you're going to *return* me to Alex? As if I were his property?" I don't even try to hide my outrage.

Hecate eyes me appraisingly. “This one has spunk. I like her.”

Bael sighs. “My apologies, Alyssa. But you *did* say you were from Elonia, no?”

When I nod, he continues. “Well, are not women basically property there?” he asks. “While I don’t agree with the customs of your world, it’s sheer hubris for gods to carelessly disregard the laws and customs of any of the mortal realms. However backward they might be.”

Wait. What? World? Mortal realms?

I look at him searchingly. “I don’t understand.”

Hecate lets out a low whistle. “For a rule follower, you’re sure striking out tonight, fang boy. First, you *bite* the girl. Then you let slip that the only reality she’s ever known is a mere fragment of the fractured whole. Your memory modification skills are good, but are they *that* good? She’s gonna have a big enough gap in her memory after you break the charm, so you might wanna start *watching what you say* unless...” she trails off.

I stare at Hecate, noticing for the first time that there’s something strange about her eyes. I had thought them an ordinary blue. But now, it’s almost as if I’m looking into the eye of a storm.

“What charm?” Bael asks, interrupting my thoughts, which were beginning to go back down a decidedly naughty path.

“The charm placed on the cursed hair combs, numbskull,” Hecate says. “Thankfully, you followed my instructions and appear to have removed them with some alacrity or we’d be sitting here talking to a shade. But any objects created by that nymph hedge witch are going to have certain lingering... side effects.”

As the witch utters that last word, her swirling blue eyes meet mine, and she shoots me another knowing wink. “You *asked* him to bite you, girl, didn’t you?”

Face hot, I nod.

Hecate slaps her knee and dissolves into peals of laughter. “I knew it! Of course Captain Self Control had to be pushed to take what he wanted. Oh, this is rich. That slut sorceress will be so pissed when she finds out how Bael’s affliction managed to distort her spell work.” Abruptly, however, she stops laughing. “Still, it’s good I interrupted you two when I did. A thank you wouldn’t be amiss.”

“I’m not thanking you for anything, witch,” Bael snaps. “It’s your fault we’re in this predicament to begin with—but we’ll deal with that later. Right now, you’re going to tell us exactly what you mean by ‘side effects.’ And then you’re going to explain how to cure them. No tricks.”

Hecate shakes her head. “If your discomfort weren’t so delicious, I’d just leave you to figure it out on your own. That’s the most you deserve, given how disrespectful you’re being. But no, I think it will be more entertaining to see your reaction when I spell it out for you. Do you have any popcorn in that kitchen by any chance?” She gestures toward a room behind me.

“Hecate...” Bael warns.

“Fine. Be that way.” The witch sighs theatrically. “The magic of less powerful witches tends to operate in a single key, to use a music metaphor. For Calypso, that key is lust. She placed a pretty powerful attraction charm on her cart of cursed jewelry and accessories. I assume to make them more attractive to the unwary. If your only tool is a hammer...”

The witch shrugs, then continues. “Anyway, you freed Alyssa from the primary curse placed on those hair combs—which incidentally was a deathlike slumber that *would* have progressed to actual death without intervention. But the attraction charm will remain in play until someone helps her break it, which I’d suggest doing soon since the effects of that particular charm intensify with time. Awkward, to say the least, since attraction charms function by causing the victim to become *desperately* attracted to whoever is nearest. If you were to leave the room, I daresay I’d find myself the object of Alyssa’s affections.” The witch winks at me yet again.

“Why are you sitting here telling us this?” Bael demands. “Brew a fucking antidote!”

Hecate tilts her head to one side. “Are you *sure* you don’t have any popcorn?” When Bael simply glares at her, she sighs. “You really should have paid better attention to my lessons. One cannot break spells with potions. Action is required. And the only antidote for an *attraction* charm is for the afflicted to follow her attraction to its... conclusion. Once she does, the spell will break.”

I turn to the witch. “You just said I can break the spell with anyone. So I *could* just go find Alex and take care of it that way, right?”

For some reason, this question seems to make Hecate unhappy. “In theory, yes. But is that really what you want, child?” She fixes her swirling blue eyes on me as if searching for something.

I shiver at the intensity of her stare. No, that isn’t what I want. Or rather, Alex isn’t *who* I want. But he is who I’m *supposed* to want, the man I’ve already agreed to wed.

Sidestepping her question, I say, “You said earlier that Bael’s, err, affliction distorted her spell work. What did you mean by that?”

At this, Hecate smiles. “Oh, that’s simple. Normally, the attraction charm would create a two-way erotic push-pull between the afflicted and whoever is nearest, playing on the desires of both and causing a mutual urge to please. So had you been saved by a normal man, or even a normal male god, well...” The witch makes an obscene gesture with her hands. “But since you were saved by fang boy here, instead, I’m guessing his lust for your blood overrode his interest in other aspects of your person.” She points to my foot. “Probably because you were already bleeding.”

“What exactly needs to happen for the spell to be broken?” Bael asks.

Hecate laughs. “Give me a break. You’re experienced enough that you don’t need me to explain the birds and bees to you.”

“I meant, how far does it have to go? Is coitus a requirement or merely mutual pleasure?” Bael asks, voice tight. “Because the girl is a virgin.”

“I really wish you’d stop talking about me as if I weren’t here,” I protest. “And stop referring to me as a ‘girl’ while you’re at it. I’m twenty-one.”

“Yes, twenty-one and in the first bloom of youth with all the worlds spread out before you. But still a child, albeit a spunky one,” Hecate replies. “But to answer Mr. Rules Follower’s question, mutual pleasure should suffice. But it must be *mutual*.” She looks thoughtful for a moment. “On second thought, maybe you *would* be wise to seek out that bland mortal of yours. Considering the scene I walked in on earlier, giving in to the push-pull of fang boy’s desires might very well prove suicidal.”

Bael glares at the witch. “You know I haven’t killed a mortal in centuries.”

“True, but we both know why you’re tempted to now.” Hecate laughs again, as if amused by the idea of my death, then turns to me. “What will it be, child? I may be ancient, but I’m all for women’s lib. So the choice is yours. Do I escort you back to the safety of your mortal or leave you here to take your chances with Bael?”

BAEL

SILENTLY, I curse Calypso for putting us in this position with her shoddy spell work. Because the truth of Hecate's assessment of the situation is plain in Alyssa's scent, in the pale pink roses of desire on her flushed cheeks. She's staring at me from the other end of the sofa as if she's half-afraid I'll devour her.

No, as if she *wants* me to devour her.

And gods help me, but I want to do just that. I can still taste her rich, warm blood, still feel the way she melted against me, boneless as I greedily drank what she so freely offered.

Hecate is right; it would be suicidal for Alyssa to try to break the spell with me. And yet, if that's her desire, I know that I don't have the strength to refuse. Don't have the strength to continue denying whatever *this* is between us.

"Did you follow everything the witch just said?" I ask, voice strained.

Eyes as wild as I feel, Alyssa nods. "Yeah."

"Do you want me to help you find your..." I hesitate, suddenly unable to refer to the mortal male as her fiancé. "Do you want me to help you find Alex?"

Hecate rolls her eyes. "Stop trying to stage-manage everything, fang boy. If she chooses the mortal, I can lead her to him without your help."

Ignoring the witch, Alyssa searches my face as if looking for something she doesn't seem to find. Then her gaze drifts lower, landing on the tent in my trousers.

"You want me," she blurts out.

"Of course."

"Then why are you acting so indifferent?"

I frown. "I'm not."

"You just offered to help me find my assigned mate so I could have sex with him," she says, voice indignant. "Seems pretty indifferent to me."

“That’s what you told Hecate you wanted!” I protest.

“No.” She shakes her head. “I asked if breaking the spell with him would be possible. I never said that’s what I wanted.”

“Well, more the fool you,” I say, unable to keep the bitterness out of my voice.

Alyssa raises an eyebrow. “Excuse me?”

“You heard the witch,” I snap. “I’m a monster. I could have killed you earlier.”

I wanted to kill you. I still want to kill you. Every selfish bone in my body wants to discover if the connection between us is real, wants to discover if you’re the one I’ve been waiting for all these years.

And yet I don’t say any of that. How can I? All of Dante’s previous failures have shown me the futility of *that* particular hope.

Eyes dark and innocent, she softly says, “But you didn’t.”

“Only because the witch intervened.”

“You didn’t hurt me in the maze, either,” she points out, voice way too trusting. “And you could have.”

“Because I ran.”

“I wish you hadn’t.”

Gods, this girl is going to be my undoing.

“Alyssa, what *do* you want?”

“You.”

I sigh. “Only because you’re under the influence of an attraction charm.”

“I wasn’t the other night,” she argues. “Neither of us were.”

“Why are you making this so damnably difficult?” I demand, my voice angrier than I intend. “I’m trying to behave honorably here.”

“Screw your honor.” Moving closer, she places her hand on my knee. “You don’t feel this?”

I want to roar that *of course* I feel it. I’d have to be completely insensate to *not* feel the magical current that passes between us every time we touch. That kind of chemistry, that kind of compatibility, isn’t unheard of, but it is rare—the kind of rarity that inspired the poets of old and that has caused men to destroy entire cities, forfeit empires, ruin lives.

But all I say is, “Hecate’s right. You are a child. Of course I feel it, but it’s not worth risking your life over.”

The witch clears her throat. “Hecate is also still here, you know. And as touching as this little scene is, I have other places to be.”

Alyssa glares at the witch. “Then go. Because I’m *not* a child, but you’re both treating me like one and it’s getting old.”

Hecate shakes her head. “If I didn’t know you’d been hit by that hedge witch’s spell, I’d punish you for your impertinence. As it is, I’ll expect an apology the next time we meet—assuming you survive tonight, that is.”

And with *that* cheerful observation, Hecate disappears. I groan.

“Pissing off the witch was rash,” I say, my hand closing over Alyssa’s. “But gods help me, I want you too. Be that as it may, I’m not going to fuck you because you *don’t* know what you ask. But,” I add when she starts to protest, “if you’re sure this is really what you want, we can do... other things.”

Staring up at me, she squeezes my hand but doesn’t answer.

I take a deep breath. “You push the limits of my control, Alyssa. You get under my skin. I don’t claim to know how or why, but if you didn’t...” I shake my head. “Well, I wouldn’t even be entertaining this because it’s sheer—”

“Stop talking and kiss me.”

Innocent child, gorgeous fool.

But I’m the fool, not her. A fool to allow this, and a fool because I half suspect that I’m on the verge of breaking one of my own rules. But still I stand, pulling her up off of the sofa and into my arms. As I steal yet another taste of those rose-red lips, I wonder what this kiss will prove to be worth.

What is the price of claiming her mouth, of allowing her to melt into me? Because the more time I spend with this woman, this innocent who’s so offended by being called a girl, the rarer she seems. A beauty beyond compare, yes, but I’m beginning to discover that there’s so much more to her. There are layers to this creature who sets my body on fire as she presses her curves against me, layers I want to uncover.

And yet, no desire of mine can ever be anything other than corrupt. The goddess of love made sure of that. And as Alyssa returns my kisses with a passion that belies her inexperience, I’m reminded of that harsh reality by the presence of my fangs.

Every selfish bone in my body wants to bite her, wants to drink from her until she’s still and cold. Gods help me, but I want something I’ve never dared desire. I want to discover whether the connection between us is real. Kissing her now, it feels real—but what is real and what is false when Hecate just admitted that Alyssa is suffering from the effects of another witch’s spell?

Not trusting myself so near the tempting column of her neck, I break the kiss and take a step back, holding her at arm’s length. She stares up at me, cheeks flushed, her wide dark eyes so trusting—so fucking innocent. And as I meet her gaze, I can’t say what she sees in mine, but it doesn’t seem to frighten her the way it should.

“You want to break Calypso’s spell?”

“Yes.”

Mentally, I replay Hecate’s words, struggling to find a way out of this that doesn’t end in Alyssa’s death. I feel in control enough, although just barely, that I suspect it *can* be broken without me drinking from her again.

Because I’d be a liar if I claimed it was just her blood I desire. And yet I also know that it’s not *just* her blood that I don’t dare take—not when she still intends to return to her assigned mate.

But even if that weren’t a consideration, the rules governing her world aren’t the only reason I have for not wanting to risk coitus with her. Because if I were to allow myself to bury my cock in her, well... I’m not a saint, and she’s the greatest temptation I’ve ever faced. I doubt my control over the curse’s cravings would extend that far.

But if Hecate can be believed, mutual pleasure is all Calypso’s spell demands...

“Do you trust me?” I ask, praying she’ll have the sense to say no.

But of course she nods.

Gently, I turn us so that she’s facing the sofa. Then I release her arms and undo my belt before taking a seat. “On your knees, love.”

While she may be innocent, Alyssa isn’t stupid. The heated look in her eyes says that she knows exactly what I want, what I require from her now.

She drops to her knees.

The hands that undo my fly are small, delicate, and utterly self-assured. Yet still she seems to struggle with removing my trousers completely. So with an impatience that’s uncharacteristic, I murmur a spell, banishing the offending garments to the clothes hamper in my bedroom.

Alyssa’s eyes grow wider as she takes in my sudden nudity from the waist down. But then she smiles and licks her lips, holding my gaze as she takes my cock in one hand before wrapping those rose-red lips around its head.

Gods, it seems as if I’ve wanted her, wanted *this*, for an eternity, even if it has only been a matter of days. Because when the soft, wet warmth of her inexperienced tongue slides along my length, it’s somehow better than receiving a blow job from the most experienced whore.

Yet I can’t help but wonder whether I should revise my assessment of her inexperience as she runs her tongue slowly up my cock, pausing to pay attention to the sensitive spot near the head before returning to the base and retracing the same path. But mortal scents never lie—Alyssa *is* innocent, but somehow she’s also completely attuned to my every desire. The fault of the attraction charm, or something more?

But all thoughts of witches and spells are banished when she runs her tongue over my balls before continuing her explorations upward.

“You liked that.” She cups my balls with one hand and strokes my shaft with the other. “What about this?” she asks an instant before she wraps her lips around the head of my cock, engulfing me.

“Alyssa...” I groan, stroking her hair as she slides her lips up and down my length. “Oh, fuck,” I gasp, coherent thought fleeing as she teases my shaft with her tongue even as her lips continue to suck, as her hand continues to slide.

Something so simple shouldn’t so utterly undo my self-control. But something in the way this woman touches me, the way she applies pressure with her tongue and lips *just so* while looking up at me with eyes I half-fear I’ll drown in makes it impossible to hold back, to even dream of holding back.

“Alyssa, I’m—” I try to warn her, but it’s too late, I’m too close. My release floods her mouth, and gods help me, but she swallows every last drop.

I pull her up onto my lap, my cock already stirring again as I kiss her and taste myself on her lips. Perhaps selfishly beginning with my own pleasure was a mistake, because I can feel how the magical tendrils of Calypso’s spell were strengthened rather than weakened by my orgasm.

But even if the magic swirling around Alyssa wasn’t palpable, I find all the proof I need of how desperate her desire has become when I slide a finger beneath the damp fabric of her panties. Not breaking the kiss, I rise, cradling her against my chest as I carry her into the darkness of my bedroom.

ALYSSA

THIS MAN'S MOUTH, his kisses, the taste of him still lingering on my lips—these are all I know as he picks me up and carries me into the darkness. But then I feel soft blankets and pillows beneath me and his weight on top of me as we tumble onto a bed.

To my disappointment, he breaks the kiss, murmuring words in Greek that I can't quite follow, and the room is illuminated by the soft glow of dozens of white candles. It's a romantic gesture for sure, but when he murmurs yet another phrase in Greek, I forget all about the candles.

Holy fuck.

Because now he is totally nude. My mouth goes dry at the sight of the perfect male specimen kneeling on the bed before me.

Oh, I've seen naked men before. You can find photos and videos of anything in espace. But I've known that most of those photos and videos are fake, manipulated to provide the fantasy of the ideal human male. Because other than soldiers, no one receives the nutritional allotments nor the physical space to develop those kinds of muscles.

Hell, I doubt many men would manage to look like that if they did. Any lingering doubts I may have had about Bael's claims to be a god evaporate. To say that he's genetically gifted is the understatement of the century, and I wonder briefly who his parents are.

But the heat of his gaze pushes any speculation about the identity of his parents from my mind. Because Bael is staring down at me, fangs lengthened, as if he'll devour me. And as much as I long for him, long to feel his cock inside me, my heart begins to race with something more than desire—fear.

When he asked if I trusted him, I didn't lie. Because there's something about being near this man that feels so right, so inevitable that it seems impossible to not trust it, to not trust him.

And yet when faced with those fangs—fangs I *want* to bite me—I wonder whether maybe he's right and I am a fool.

Strong fingers grip the back of my head. He brushes my lips with his, then pulls back. But our faces are still inches apart, and I feel myself falling toward him even as he quietly casts another spell.

“That's better,” he murmurs. “Gods, you're more perfect than I imagined.”

I'm about to ask what he means, but then I realize with a shock that my clothes are gone. All of them. I should feel exposed, spread out on top of the counterpane like this, but instead I feel... worshipped. He runs his hands over my body as his eyes devour me. No one has ever touched me with such intention, such *reverence*.

I'm used to being told I'm beautiful. Used to being told that, and then dismissing it because praise of my exterior beauty has always felt superficial. Empty. But there's nothing empty about the way Bael is looking at me now. And there's nothing superficial about how he's touching me...

Each place his hands go, that strange, surreal current of electricity follows. I thought that I wanted him, *needed him* before. But the feelings he's pulling from me now make the other night in the maze pale in comparison. And as he explores my body, my fear fades, replaced by excitement.

His fingers find and tease one of my nipples, and I let out an involuntary moan. Suddenly I know that I'll do anything this man says, as long as he says it with his hands. The feeling of longing, of wanting more, of wanting to *please* him is nearly as intense as when he bit me earlier.

And then he's kissing me again, the fingers on my nipple becoming more insistent and demanding. It's both everything and not enough, even if I realize I have no idea what *enough* would even be. Because I don't think I'll ever be able to get enough of this man, not when he kisses me like this, when he touches me like *that*.

But as our kisses become more desperate, more all-consuming, my need for more only intensifies. And then his head moves lower as he kisses a burning trail down my body, his hands following in the wake of his mouth, teasing out all of my most sensitive places. But when he finally reaches my sex, I cry out, surprised by the intensity of the sensation.

And that's when I discover that Bael Styx is an absolute sadist, determined to torment me. I lose track of time as he brings me again and again to the edge of a release that he then denies.

He was right. I had no idea what I was asking because I never imagined that I could feel like *this*. So alive, so out of control.

It can't simply be his tongue that has me so undone, so *desperate*. Maybe it's the attraction spell, maybe it's whatever strange current seems to pass between us, but nothing has ever made me feel the way this man's tongue does.

And yet it's not enough, not what I really want. Because as amazing as his tongue feels on my clit, it's not what I really need.

"Please," I beg. "Bael, I need you—"

He slides a finger inside me, and then another, even as his tongue becomes more insistent. I cry out at the sensations washing over me.

Suddenly I don't want the orgasm he's been denying me, not without more of him filling me than those two fingers, not without *him* filling me. His cock. The need to be closer to him is torture. But he's too skilled, too determined, and I understand that what I want doesn't matter, not when he's determined to make me come.

And I do, helpless beneath his tongue as impossible waves of pleasure wash over me, again and again until nothing exists but my desire for this man and the need to be closer to him, for this moment to never end.

BAEL

PULLING ALYSSA INTO MY ARMS, I gently kiss her. The attraction charm collapses a moment later, the energetic shift palpable. But the spell being broken does nothing to dissipate the tension within me.

The spell ending does seem, however, to have an effect on Alyssa. Because she collapses against my chest when I release her lips, nestling her head against my shoulder. Her innocent trust is disarming. And dangerous. It makes me want to claim her fully, finish what we started. And worse, it makes me want to utter promises I won't be able to keep.

So pressing my mouth against her ear, I murmur the command, "Sleep, beauty." And she does, succumbing both to the power of my suggestion and her own exhaustion. Sighing, I murmur another spell, drawing the covers over us.

Gods, what have I done?

No, I didn't bite her, and I left her maidenhead intact, but... fuck, haven't I claimed her as thoroughly as if I hadn't? Because there's no way that I'm going to be able to let her walk out of my life in the dawn light, even though I need to, even though I know that's what she intends to do.

Fantasies run through my mind of keeping her here with me, of never letting her return to her own world. Might not one mortal lifetime be better than an eternity apart? Better than watching her marry and bed another man? Maybe I *could* manage not to bite her, night after night, manage to resist the temptation of rolling the dice and attempting the ritual...

Really, Bael? Even once she becomes old and grey and full of sleep, and you know you're about to lose her to your father's realm? You'd resist the temptation even then? Or would you selfishly take that risk, despite knowing the price she'll pay if you bet wrong?

Damn Hecate for putting me in this position, because she admitted that much earlier, didn't she? Well... maybe that's a bit of a stretch. But she *did* admit that she'd hacked into some government system and manipulated Beatrice into entering my realm, who of course brought a friend... And that wasn't all she let slip...

There was that business about the "Snow White gambit" and a disagreement with my father. If *he* has an interest in Alyssa, I need to know what that is. Because when my father intervenes in the lives of mortals...

Well, hasn't he already? Calypso wasn't acting alone, and I'm fairly certain that I recognized the gemstones on those combs. The combs that nearly killed the woman I love.

Fucking hell, do I love her?

We barely know each other. We're from different worlds. There's no way that it could work. Fuck. I'm getting as bad as Dante, imagining that I love a woman I barely know. So what if she's the most perfect creature I've ever seen? It means nothing that she recognized one of my favorite poets. Nor does it mean anything that she fucking fits against me perfectly and smells like innocence and forgotten afternoons from my childhood.

Because whether I love her or not doesn't matter. What matters is that someone from *my* world tried to kill her tonight, and I have a pretty good idea who.

I need to talk to Hecate. Reluctant to leave the warmth of the bed or to risk disturbing Alyssa's slumber, I mutter a spell under my breath, summoning my phone from where it still rests inside the pocket of the pants I banished earlier. Silently, it floats through the air and into my waiting hand.

Impatient, I shoot off a text to the witch, demanding an answer to the question she evaded at dinner.

Her reply is almost immediate: *Not my monkeys, not my circus. Talk to your dad, fang boy.*

Well, at least I assume that's what it's supposed to say. More than any other immortal I know, Hecate has fully embraced the twenty-first century and all that entails. So not only is she able to hack into allegedly secure government computer systems, she is firmly of the opinion that one can *never* use too many emojis. While the series of dancing monkeys are self-explanatory and she's been using the male vampire emoji instead of my given name for years now, I'm only guessing that the red and white striped tent means "circus."

Bloody, obnoxious witch.

Unfortunately, she's right. I *do* need to talk to Dad since he's clearly at the bottom of all this. Too bad he is *not* as enthusiastic about texting as Hecate and the twins are. But I think I know how to force a reply.

Retrieving the enchanted hair combs from my pants pocket is accomplished with another spell, but these I let come to rest on the nightstand. My disinclination to touch them again is irrational—they can't harm me when all of their malice has already been spent on Alyssa. But I still snap a picture of them without picking them up, unable to overcome my revulsion for the cursed objects.

I send the photo to my father, along with a single sentence. *We need to talk.*

And then I wait in the darkness as I've waited so many times in my long life for my father to deign to acknowledge me. It's not that he's a bad parent. Not exactly. But his affections have always run hot and cold, vacillating between benign neglect and unwelcome interference.

I thought I'd come to terms with his fickleness, but this time he's taken "unwelcome interference" to an entirely new level. It was one thing when it was just my life he was messing up, but dragging innocent mortals into it is a step too far.

There are rules governing the degree of interference gods may exercise in mortal lives. Sure, those rules aren't immutable, for the most part. But when gods don't stay in their lanes, mortal civilizations tend to collapse. And the mortal realms are unstable enough right now without divine interference.

Particularly not interference from one of the Big Three.

If his brothers knew what he'd done, they'd lose their minds. But Zeus has been missing in action for decades now, and Dad's other brother has enough problems without me bringing this to him. No, it's best to keep this within the immediate family, although that would be easier if the bastard would reply to my fucking texts.

Dad has disappointed me before, but never like this. What the hell was he thinking, asking a mentally unstable sorceress to do his dirty work? Because the thing about Calypso is that she *is* unhinged. Goddamn out of her mind, in all honesty.

She wasn't always. But Odysseus's abandonment changed her. She's a prime example of why it's a mistake for gods and goddesses to become too attached to mortals. It never ends well. Mortality and immortality within one relationship are a toxic brew. Plain and simple.

Tonight was a prime example of that principle in action. Alyssa nearly lost her life because my father has somehow gotten it into his head that she's the one who can end my curse. *How* he arrived at that conclusion troubles me. The timeline simply doesn't make sense.

Sighing, I brush a strand of hair away from Alyssa's face, searching for clues as to why Dad has decided this particular mortal is the answer to a centuries-old curse. Yes, there's an undeniable chemistry between us. More than chemistry even—my magic responds to her. But Dad was already in Crete when Alyssa and I met. He had no way of knowing unless...

Not for the first time, I wonder how many spies he has among those in my employ. It's the only logical explanation... Of course, as explanations go, it isn't even that logical. There are holes in it that I could ride a centaur through.

Because Alyssa isn't the first pretty face that I've shown an interest in, yet Dad has never hired a witch to try to assassinate any of my former lovers. And I hadn't done more than kiss her when he sent Calypso here with those infernal combs. What angle to this am I missing?

Could it really be as simple as him deciding that the friend of Dante's bride might be a suitable match? My old man is impulsive, but he's not *that* impulsive, which means...

Mentally, I replay my conversation with Hecate at the restaurant.

Don't think I didn't notice you staring at her earlier. Like I said, I'm never wrong about magic.

Fuck. It's been right in front of me. I was an idiot to assume that Alyssa arriving in my realm was an unlucky coincidence, that when Hecate lured Beatrice here, she'd simply decided to bring a friend along. But no... somehow, Hecate manipulated *both* women. She bloody admitted as much.

So for some reason, the witch has decided that Alyssa's the one who can end my affliction and undo Aphrodite's curse, and Dad decided to roll with that. But can she? And even if she can, I couldn't ask that of her. Because even if Hecate is right, the ritual comes with consequences, even if we were to

succeed.

The dawn's light is streaking the sky when my phone finally vibrates on the nightstand. I pick it up only to be disappointed by Mal posting yet another photo to the family group text.

Sighing, I scroll through the barrage of photos and insults the twins have sent since their arrival in Crete. At this point, both of the twins appear to be pretty well occupied with doing keg stands and flirting with mortal tourists, so I scroll back up to earlier texts, flipping through photos of the happy couple instead.

Dante's new wife is gorgeous; I'll give him that, even if she isn't really my type. No, the stab of envy I feel has nothing to do with his wife's looks, but rather the way she looks at him. I thought he was insane to elope, let alone elope with the intention of trying the ritual so soon, but there's an easy intimacy between them that shines through in the photos. It's exactly how Mom used to look at Dad before everything went to hell.

I place my phone on the bedside table, the thought of my mother a potent reminder of why I'll live with this curse the rest of my life. Because sure, the ritual worked for Dante, but that doesn't mean that what he's found will last.

Yes, I miss the sunlight. But the thought of finding that kind of happiness only to later have it snatched away? Well, there are worse fates than craving blood and only ever visiting the mortal realm by night.

And it may make me a heartless bastard, but there are some mistakes that I'm not willing to make... even if Alyssa does look stunning in the morning light.

ALYSSA

*MIRROR, mirror, who sees across space,
Show me, show me Lady Alyssa's face.*

The voice belongs to Bea, but I can't see her, can't see anything—I can only hear her reciting the command phrase, as if from a great distance. Yet when the mirror daemon replies, it feels closer somehow, more immediate.

Behold her, mistress, in the cursed's bed.

Speak softly now, for you dwell within her head.

But the next voice to speak doesn't belong to Bea, and it's not particularly quiet. "Oh, so they did break the attraction charm—or at least had a good time trying, from the looks of it. In any case, fang boy doesn't appear to have killed her."

I struggle to open my eyes and locate the source of the voice, but it's as if I'm being held beneath dark depths that I can't surface from.

"No, girl, stay asleep!" the voice hisses. "Once you awaken, the connection will break. It's taken me half the day already to get Bea's Lethe to function in this climate."

I feel myself falling deeper into the surrounding darkness. For a moment, I wonder whether I'm alone, but then Bea speaks again.

"Hecate tried to get the visual link to go both ways, but she can't while your eyes are closed. And she's right, it's important that you stay asleep because I can't place video calls from Cornwall, something about interference from the mines."

Cornwall? Mines?

I have so many questions, but speaking feels even more impossible than opening my eyes.

"Good thing that you don't *need* to do either," Hecate says, voice tart. "We can hear your thoughts just fine, but there's no time to answer your questions now. You need to—"

"Oh my god, he's standing up. Shit! Should we be seeing this?" Bea exclaims, talking over Hecate. "I feel like a pervert. I can see his—"

Hecate cuts her off. “Fang boy shouldn’t sleep nude if he’s concerned about his modesty.”

“But he doesn’t know that we’re in his bedroom,” Bea protests.

“We aren’t in his bedroom, not technically. We’re in Alyssa’s dream, which happens to be occurring within his... Oh, never mind! You were so eager to speak with her, so stop wasting time gawking at your brother-in-law and *speak*. He’s going into the bathroom now, anyway.”

Brother-in-law?

Bea sighs. “We have a lot to catch up on, and my Lethe is on the fritz. Dante suggested just going back to the Lotus so you and I can talk face-to-face, but I really think you should see this. I didn’t really get it myself until we went to Crete.”

As Bea is speaking, I become aware of the sound of running water. I feel my attention torn between my friend’s voice and the gentle splash of falling water.

“Focus, Alyssa. We’re losing the connection.” Hecate’s voice is louder than before—as if she’s deliberately trying to drown out the sound of the water. “Bea is right that you ought to see Cornwall. Fang boy is too much of a rules follower to ever agree to that, but I can sneak you out behind his back. I’ll be there as soon as I finish sewing these seams. Try to stay asleep until I arrive—or at least pretend. Stall if you must, but don’t leave the bedroom until I arrive.”

“I love you, Alyssa! Trust me, it’s all going to...”

The rest of whatever Bea meant to say fades out, but I don’t awaken. Not all the way at least, but the darkness does seem to be lightening. The sound of gently falling water from the next room is soothing...

And then memories of the night before wash over me, pushing aside my strange dream, and I feel anything but soothed. Bael’s cock in my mouth, his hands on my body...

My body. Not opening my eyes, I stretch languidly, increasingly aware of my body and the silk sheets beneath me, covering me. There’s a pleasant ache between my legs where Bael’s fingers were the night before. And his scent permeates the pillow beneath my head. Being here feels right, good, as if this is where I’m supposed to be.

A gentle hand brushes aside my hair. Bael? No, the scent is wrong. Similar, yes, but not his.

Fighting through the last vestiges of sleep, I struggle to open my eyes as an unfamiliar male voice whispers into my ear, “Shh, it’s okay. No need to awaken and bother with all the formalities, angel. I’m perfectly happy to dine exactly like this.”

The hot press of lips against my neck cuts through the last of my lingering sleepiness. I open my eyes just as Bael slams a strange man to the bedroom floor. Heart racing, I sit up, trying to make sense of the scene playing out before me.

An attractive blond guy lies dazed on the carpet. Bael—who is completely nude—is straddling the man, his fingers wrapped around the stranger’s throat.

Fangs bared, Bael growls one word, “*Mine.*”

Something about the way he utters that single word—low, gravelly, possessive—makes my face heat. Still trying to process what the hell is going on, I pull the sheet up over my breasts.

Am I his? Do I want to be?

But then I watch in horror as Bael squeezes the guy's neck. He leans down until his fangs are inches from the guy's face. "Touch her again, and I'll bind you in Tartarus myself."

Releasing the stranger, Bael stands. He disappears into the bathroom, returning seconds later with a towel wrapped around his waist. Glaring down at the guy on the floor, he grabs his arm and yanks him to his feet.

"Hey!" The blond pulls his arm away as Bael starts to drag him toward the door. "What the fuck, dude?"

"I need to finish my shower, and I'm not leaving you alone with her," Bael snaps.

Sure enough, there are still soap suds in Bael's hair. The sight would be comical, except I'm not sure how I feel about... well, any of this. What we did last night, how Bael's behaving now...

I clear my throat. "Excuse me, but I'd also like an explanation."

Both men turn toward me. Bael is glaring, fangs still bared. The stranger, however, shoots me an apologetic look—although the effect is somewhat ruined by the fact that he *also* has fangs.

"I'm really sorry. I totally misread the situation." He turns back to Bael, holding both hands up in a gesture of surrender. "Relax, bro. This is all a misunderstanding. I thought I was poaching your breakfast, not your woman."

I stare at the guy, incredulous. I'm not Bael's woman—am I? It was supposed to be just one night... But before I can voice my protest, Bael speaks first.

"And *what*, pray tell, made you think that Alyssa was my breakfast?" He addresses his question to the blond guy, managing to look impressively bossy for a man who's practically naked and still has shampoo in his hair.

"Umm, the fact that there was a woman in your apartment?" the guy asks, then adds, "At dawn, no less. You never date. It was a reasonable assumption."

Not replying, Bael presses a button on the wall.

A cheerful female voice asks, "Yes, Lord Bael, how may I help you?"

"Please have a thrall sent up to the penthouse." He glances at the guy's still elongated fangs, then adds, "As quickly as possible."

"Yes, sir. Right away. Would you prefer a male or a female?"

"Whoever can get here first." He presses the button again, cutting off the chirpy reply.

"Thank you," the guy says, a genuine note of gratitude in his voice. "I'm starving. No idea who pissed in his Cheerios, but Dad's been being an utter prick, refusing to let us drink from any of the party

babes.”

“I didn’t do it for you,” Bael snaps. “I need to make you safe around Alyssa.”

“Yes, about that—”

He cuts the guy off. “A discussion for *after* my shower, Val. Wait in the living room.”

The guy, Val, doesn’t argue, likely because Bael’s tone is still, frankly, pretty damn scary. Once he’s gone, Bael slams the bedroom door shut. When he turns to face me, I can’t help but notice that his fangs are still on full display.

Whatever. I probably should be intimidated by that, but honestly after everything that just went down, Bael’s fangs feel like the least of my problems. I have so many questions, some I’m not even sure I *want* answered.

Settling on a simple one, I say, “I’m assuming Val’s your brother?”

“One of them.” Bael sighs and runs a hand through his hair, wincing when it comes away soapy. “We have a lot to discuss—after we shower and dress. I’d offer to let you go first, but...” He gestures toward his sudsy hair.

Feeling numb, I just nod, not saying anything as he once more disappears into the bathroom, this time closing the door behind him. When he leaves, I make no move to get up, trying to make sense of what just happened.

Val’s your brother?

One of them.

Right. Last night, he’d said that his brothers were all afflicted by the same curse as him. But there was something else about brothers...

Hecate. In my dream, she referred to Bael as Bea’s brother-in-law.

But *was* it just a dream, or was Bea really trying to contact me? Fuck. I need to talk to Bea. Because if my best friend married a vampire...

Through the bathroom door, I can still hear the shower running. Quickly, I search the bedroom for my Lethe, but it’s nowhere in sight. Crap. Did I drop my purse last night when I passed out?

Unless Bael grabbed it when he carried me up here and it’s still in the living room... But given that there’s a hungry vampire out there, I’m not about to go check. Besides, if my dream *wasn’t* a dream and that conversation actually happened, Hecate told me to stay put.

The shower stops, and I scramble back onto the bed, pulling the sheet up over me. But as the bathroom door remains closed, my thoughts wander, bouncing between the previous night and the weird scene with Bael’s brother, finally landing land on Alex.

Ugh. What am I doing here in Bael’s bed when I have an assigned mate, a mate I accepted, a mate that I’ve agreed to *marry*? Alex is attractive, accomplished, and...

Utterly boring.

So? Maybe boring isn't so bad if the alternative is waking up with your boyfriend's brother trying to make you his breakfast.

He's not your boyfriend, Alyssa. He's a freaking caveman who you barely know who just treated you like his property.

But at that moment my non-boyfriend exits the bathroom, freshly shaven, fangs gone, and hair soap-free. My pulse races as I realize that Bael has ditched more than fangs, stubble, and soap...

I clutch the sheet covering me more tightly, as if it could somehow protect me from my own lust. Because in the morning light, it's undeniable. This man literally has the body of a Greek god. And apparently the confidence of one as well since he seems to be completely unconcerned by his nudity.

“Shower’s all yours,” he says, disappearing into his walk-in closet.

I know I should make a beeline for the bathroom while I have the chance. But when Bael exits the closet a moment later, a freshly pressed suit draped over one arm, I haven’t moved.

He raises an eyebrow. “Is there a problem?”

I want to scream that *of course there's a problem*. I just cheated on my fiancé with a vampire who looks way too good naked and who may or may not also be the brother-in-law of my best friend. And the worst part is that as pissed off as I am that said vampire had the nerve to claim that I’m somehow *his*, the way he said it still managed to make me uncomfortably wet.

But unable to articulate any of that, I settle for asking, “What the fuck is going on?”

ALYSSA

BAEL LAYS his suit on the bed. Voice stiff, he says, “My apologies. Valefar has always been impulsive, but that was out of line even for him.”

“I was referring to your behavior, not his,” I snap.

“My behavior?” Bael asks, looking genuinely confused. “I just saved your life!”

“And I’m super grateful, *Lord Bael*,” I say, rolling my eyes. “But that doesn’t give you license to talk about me as if I’m your property just because we fooled around last night.”

“While you are under my roof and in my bed, you’re my responsibility.” Bael clenches his jaw.

“Well, that’s a temporary problem, now, isn’t it?” I stand, still clutching the sheet to my chest. Belatedly, I realize that it’s not just my purse that’s missing. My clothes are nowhere in sight.

Too aware of Bael’s gaze on me, I try to fashion the fabric into a toga, but the slippery material won’t cooperate. “What did you do with my dress?” I demand, dropping the sheet in frustration.

Turning his back to me, Bael walks over to the window. Still not replying, he mutters something under his breath in Greek. My outfit from the night before appears on the bed next to his suit—right down to my stiletto sandals. My purse, however, is conspicuously absent.

But deciding I’ll deal with finding the purse later, I snatch my bra and underwear off the bed. While a shower does sound tempting, I need to put some sort of barrier between us before I do something else I’ll regret.

I’m not sure whether it’s him I don’t trust or myself. But as I pull my bra and underwear on, Bael still says nothing, keeping his back to me as he stares out at the lightening Vegas skyline.

And as the silence between us grows, I begin to regret my sarcastic outburst. Yeah, that *mine* bullshit was pretty caveman. But he also did save my life—for the second time in less than twenty-four hours if what Hecate said about the hair combs is true.

Sighing, I walk around the bed, coming to a stop a few feet away from him. Something about his posture warns me not to come any closer.

“Look, I’m sorry,” I say to his naked back, trying to ignore the way the water still beads on the powerful muscles. “I do appreciate what you did—both with Val and last night. But it’s a lot to process...”

“You don’t need to apologize, Alyssa.” He sighs, still staring out the window. “You have every right to be angry. You were in danger this morning because of *me*. Because you woke up in *my* bed and it didn’t occur to me to ward the penthouse against my own goddamn brother. Last night, you were poisoned while a guest at *my* resort. And if I had to guess, my father was behind it.”

His father. Bael still hasn’t told me who his divine parents are, but I’m beginning to have my suspicions...

“Hades.”

“Bingo.” He turns around and suddenly the distance I left between us feels nonexistent. “What tipped you off?”

I shrug. “While there are plenty of ‘tumultuous affairs’ in Greek mythology, most of the offspring are well documented. The union of Hades and Persephone being a notable exception. Also, your surname is a pretty big clue.”

He takes a step closer and runs a finger along my arm even as his gaze travels up and down my body. “Sexy as hell *and* smart.”

A shiver travels down my spine, and I swallow hard, unsure what to say to that. But he doesn’t seem to expect a reply because a moment later he continues. “And though you may hate it, love, you are also my responsibility. For the time being at least.”

Half-afraid I’ll lose myself in the dark eyes gazing into mine, I look down—and immediately regret it.

Tearing my gaze away from his cock, I shake my head. “While I’m grateful that you saved me, twice even, I’m not yours, Bael Styx. Not your possession and not your responsibility.”

“Yes, you are,” he replies, voice hard.

“Why?”

“Gods help me...” He closes his eyes and takes a step back.

My heart races when I see the reason why. His fangs... I stare at his face, knowing I should run but transfixed by the internal struggle playing out on his handsome features.

A struggle he apparently wins, for the moment at least. Turning away from me, he pulls a pair of boxers out of a dresser drawer and begins to dress with inhuman speed.

Faster than seems possible, he’s fully clothed and standing by the closed bedroom door. “Allow me to apologize again for this morning. When you’re decent, please join us in the living room. I’ll have breakfast sent up.”

Still standing by the window, I nod. I expect him to leave then, but he lingers with his hand on the doorknob, surveying me. Beneath his gaze, I feel too exposed, vulnerable.

“Was there something else?” I ask, heart racing.

“Yes.” He hesitates a moment, and then says, “This is awkward, but… can you please shower first?”

I’m not sure what I expected him to say, but it wasn’t *that*. I’d been planning to shower, but something in me bristles at the request. Who the hell does he think he is? Insisting that I’m *his*, then ordering me around like I’m a child. Also, god or not, didn’t anyone ever teach him manners?

Trying to keep my voice dignified, I say, “If it’s all the same, I’d prefer the privacy of bathing in my own room.” When he doesn’t reply, I awkwardly add, “I showered before dinner, surely I don’t already—”

“It’s not that,” he interrupts, cutting me off.

I raise an eyebrow and wait.

“Vampire senses, okay?” Sighing, he pinches the bridge of his nose. “You positively reek of desire, and if I can smell it, then so will Val…” He trails off and then mercifully leaves the room without waiting for my reply.

My respite is short lived, however. Because the moment the door closes, Hecate steps out of the closet, a length of fabric draped over one arm. Pressing her finger to her lips, she beckons for me to follow her as she disappears into the bathroom.

With a feeling of apprehension, I quickly cross the room and join her in the en suite. Finger still pressed to her lips, the witch closes the door, then turns the shower on.

“What—” I begin, but Hecate frantically shakes her head and shoves a crumpled piece of paper into my hand. I glance down at the note.

Shh. He’ll hear us. Put on the dress. I’ll explain in Cornwall.

I stare at the witch in confusion. What dress?

But at that moment, she thrusts the length of fabric she’s carrying into my arms. I hold the material out in front of me and cringe. She seriously expects me to wear *that* when I have a perfectly fine dress in the next room?

Shaking my head, I reach for the doorknob. Hecate grabs my wrist, her nails digging into my skin, and once again shakes her head.

Resigned, I nod. If playing dress-up and wearing her stupid old-fashioned dress is what it will take for the witch to agree to break me out of here, then fine, whatever.

Hecate releases my wrist and stares at me expectantly.

Sighing, I slide the ugly dress over my head. As I expected, it’s too loose. And worse, stupid laces hang off the back of the bodice.

Frustrated, I gesture toward the laces. *Now what?* I mouth the words, deciding to humor Hecate’s paranoia, even though I doubt that Bael’s hearing is *that* good.

The witch motions for me to turn around. I oblige, watching in the bathroom mirror as she stands behind me and fusses with the laces.

Her swirling blue eyes meet mine in the mirror as she mouths something that looks an awful lot like *Sorry*. But just as I'm trying to figure out what she's apologizing for, she pulls the laces tight, and everything goes black.

BAEL

YOU POSITIVELY REEK OF DESIRE.

I mentally kick myself for having been so gauche as I close the bedroom door behind me. I wasn't even completely honest with her. Val isn't the real reason I made my awkward request. Alyssa's scent alone is driving me crazy, let alone the added layer of complexity added to it every time...

Every time you make eye contact and she's instantly wet?

To my relief, I hear the shower turn on through the closed door. But when I step into the living room, that relief is replaced with irritation at the sight of Val sitting on my sofa, lazily scrolling through his phone. The thrall I summoned for him already gone.

He looks up. "Sorry again about earlier, but you still owe me, bro. It's your fault I'm here."

I stare at him as I sit on the couch opposite. "And how exactly is that *my* fault?"

Val gives me an appraising look. "I figured you'd want to know that Dad's on his way." He frowns. "Well, he's probably already here, to be honest. He hasn't summoned you yet?"

I shake my head. "He left my last text on read. Speaking of, you could have just texted. You didn't need to break into my apartment and assault my..." I hesitate. Alyssa isn't *my* anything. She can't be. But what I told her earlier is true. For the moment, she is my responsibility.

I sigh, then say, "Alyssa. Your actions earlier were completely out of line."

Val whistles softly. "Man, that mortal really has you off your game, doesn't she?"

"Hardly," I retort. "I'm as 'on my game' as ever. Why are you here, Val?"

"If you're so on your game, bro, where's the girl?"

At his question, I frown. Alyssa hasn't left. I can still hear the shower running in the en suite. Wait—the shower is *all* I can hear. While I've been sitting here, allowing myself to be distracted by Val...

Heart pounding, I sprint into the empty bedroom. No mortal heart beats in the next room. No mortal scent tempts me through the en suite's closed door. But needing to know for sure, needing to confirm my brother's betrayal, I step into the steam-filled bathroom.

The mocking splash of water on the shower's empty tiles greets me. Val and I are utterly alone.

Pushing down my dread, I turn off the shower and return to the living room. "You bastard. Where is she?"

"How the hell should I know? She's *your* girlfriend."

I grab the front of Val's shirt and drag him to his feet. "Where has he taken her?" I demand, practically growling the question.

My brother grabs my wrist. "Dude, I know you're having a bad day. But I fucking swear... if you tear this shirt..."

Disgusted, I release him and begin pacing the length of the living room. "Where the fuck is she, Val?"

He shrugs. "Fuck if I know."

"Tread carefully, little brother. You still haven't explained why you made a completely unnecessary trip to convey information that could have been communicated via text. And now you're claiming that it's a coincidence that she was stolen right out from under my nose as I sat here being distracted by you?"

Val rolls his eyes. "I came here because I wanted to see for myself the chick causing all this drama."

"What drama exactly would that be?"

"You should have seen the way Hecate laid into Dad. It was epic. Not to mention that Dante's bride was a bloody wreck when she heard what went down here. Whole house was in an uproar until Dante had the sense to remove the hysterical females from the situation." He shrugs. "I was curious, particularly when Hecate let slip that she caught you drinking the girl's blood."

"Yet you didn't have the brain cells to surmise that the woman in my bed was the *chick* you were so eager to lay eyes on?"

"Dude, I was half-starved," Val protests, a defensive note in his voice. "Plus, Mal and I may have, err, overindulged on the tequila shots. Speaking of, you don't happen to have any coffee up here, do you?"

Now it's my turn to roll my eyes. "Conjure your own coffee. And cut the crap. You'd have to have drunk a bloody *case* of tequila for it to have any effect. You were just being lazy and reckless—as always."

"You know the rest of us aren't as good as you at that conjuring crap," he mutters, voice sullen. "I did you a favor by—"

"By coming here and nearly killing a mortal under my protection?"

"By coming here to *warn* you that Dad's on his way, and he's *not* in a congenial mood after the dressing down the witch gave him."

"Clearly since he just kidnapped the girl."

“You think the old man is behind this?”

“Who the fuck else is powerful enough to break into the penthouse and remove her when the two of us were sitting *right here*?”

“Maybe she left on her own, mate. I couldn’t help but hear you two arguing earlier. She didn’t sound pleased with you,” he observes, voice maddeningly calm.

“She’s *mortal*, Val.” I roll my eyes. “There’s no way she snuck past the two of us on her own.”

“Fair enough, but that still doesn’t mean she was kidnapped, or that Dad was behind it if she was,” he points out. “Not really his style.”

“Kidnapping virgins is *exactly* his style.” Stopping my pacing, I turn to stare at him. “But what are you saying?”

Val shakes his head. “Man, you’re not usually this slow. That girl really *has* thrown you off your game. The question you should be asking is the one you already have: Who is powerful enough to break in and remove her without either of us detecting an intruder?”

“Fucking Dad!”

“I mean, I don’t know how kinky your girl is, but I know women. And *most* of them would make at least a little bit of a fuss if a strange man interrupted their shower. She didn’t let out a peep. Which suggests she went *willingly*. So who helped your girl escape?”

Head throbbing, I collapse onto the sofa and bury my face in my hands. As much as I hate to admit it, Val’s line of reasoning is logical. More logical than Dad abducting the woman he seems to be trying to force me to wed, at least if Hecate’s nonsense about a “Snow White gambit” can be believed...

I raise my head and meet Val’s eyes. “Hecate?”

Once more, he shrugs. “That witch seems to have her finger in a lot of pies, and she’s pretty damn sneaky. Plus, she and Bea are thick as thieves, and all she kept saying last night was that she needed to see her friend. Seems more logical to me than Dad, at least.”

I rub my temples, the throbbing in my head getting worse by the moment. Val seems so sure, and I can’t really fault his logic, but...

Did I really fuck things up with Alyssa so badly this morning that she actually left of her own free will? Without even a goodbye?

“Dude,” Val says, interrupting my thoughts. “You look like shit. When’s the last time you ate? Or slept, for that matter?”

Fuck. Another thing I don’t want my brother to be right about. But he is right—I do need to feed. No, what I *need* to do is find Alyssa.

“I’m still not sold on your Hecate hypothesis,” I say, ignoring his questions. “She and Alyssa didn’t exactly get off on the right foot last night. And if Hecate is anything, she’s selfish. She made it pretty clear that she’d prefer to stay out of whatever Dad’s plotting.”

“And yet your girl didn’t so much as raise her voice when *someone* appeared in that bathroom.”

“Maybe Dad disguised his appearance, pretended to be someone she trusts,” I protest.

“Occam’s razor, bro. Stop trying to overcomplicate shit.”

“What do you suggest I do then? Because my *shit*, as you so eloquently put it, has been complicated ever since Dear Old Dad attempted to murder one of my guests as part of his perverted matchmaking scheme.”

Val gives me a thoughtful look. “Is that all the girl is to you, one of your guests? Because it sure didn’t look that way earlier. I’ve never seen you get so bent out of shape about—”

“That’s all she can be,” I say, cutting him off. “Last night was an aberration. She needed help breaking an attraction charm Calypso placed on her. Nothing more.”

“Couldn’t her mortal boyfriend have done that?” Val asks. “Hecate says she has one.”

“Hecate says a lot of shit,” I retort.

Val nods. “True, but that doesn’t mean she’s always wrong. She was right about Dante and Bea. His curse really is broken, you know. Both curses. Maybe she’s right about your girl too.”

I stare at my brother in disgust. “You really expect me to run the risk of finding that out? Have you forgotten what happened all the times Dante guessed wrong? Or has partying with his new bride erased all of those failures from your mind? You helped bind enough of them. You *know...*”

I trail off, neither wanting nor needing to describe the horrors that resulted every time Dante attempted the ritual and failed. Val has seen nearly as much as I have.

“Well, if you’re too chicken to try the ritual with this woman that you’re *obviously* head over heels for, what *do* you plan to do? Because Dad seems pretty determined to force your hand. The witch has him convinced that she’s the one.”

Fuck. Val is right. Once Dad gets an idea in his head...

“I don’t know,” I admit finally. “Start by finding her first, then go from there.”

“And how are you going to do that exactly? If Hecate helped her escape, she could be literally anywhere in all the realms. You’ll never find her.”

“What would you suggest?”

“Well, first, you need to summon a thrall and fucking *feed*, so you stop being such an irritable jerk. After that, I’d suggest you have a chat with Dad.”

“You just said Dad didn’t kidnap her.”

“It seems unlikely. But he probably knows where she is, and getting his help would be more efficient than trying to track a witch who doesn’t want to be found.”

As much as my younger brother's cavalier attitude irritates me, he's right—about the first point, at least. While Dad hasn't had much luck locating either his wife or brother, finding a missing mortal will be child's play for him.

That is assuming he's in a mood to cooperate. But if Hecate *is* responsible, then Alyssa could be literally anywhere in any of the realms...

I snap my fingers.

An instant later, an anxious-looking bellboy appears before me. "Yes, Lord Bael. How may I serve you, sir?" the demon stammers.

"Retrieve a thrall. Now," I snap.

"Yes, Lord Bael, of course."

"Lovely to see that your bossy, overbearing attitude still includes the hired help in addition to your brothers and girlfriend," Val remarks once the demon leaves.

I sigh. "She's not my girlfriend."

He raises an eyebrow. "Could have fooled me."

Before I can reply, the elevator doors slide open, revealing another demon—although one of an entirely different sort than the bellboy I just dismissed.

A familiar pang of guilt hits me as an attractive, dark-haired young woman takes a hesitant step into the room. Her shiny black leather go-go boots are too tall and her skirt too short for the early hour.

"Ruby!" Val exclaims, jumping to his feet. "It's been ages. To what do we owe this pleasure?"

The succubus patiently endures Val's bear hug. When he releases her, she takes another hesitant step forward and turns toward me. "Sorry, Bael, but Dad requires your presence in the saloon."

ALYSSA

BRIGHT GREEN EYES brimming with concern stare into my own. “It’s okay, Alyssa, just breathe,” Bea urges, the anxiety in her voice belying her words.

My head pounds and black spots dance in front of me as I struggle to get my bearings. The Lotus is gone, and I’m kneeling on a wet and sandy shore. Gasping for air, I fall forward as everything spins. Bea grips my biceps, steadyng me as birds wheel overhead in an overcast sky.

“You didn’t say the dress was dangerous,” Bea says, addressing the words to a figure standing behind me.

“It isn’t,” Hecate replies in a bored tone. “She’s just being melodramatic. Nothing a change of clothes and a cup of tea won’t fix.”

“Can you stand?” Bea asks, releasing my arms. “If not, I can run and get Dante and he can carry you up to the house.”

At the mention of Bea’s husband, I shake my head, then quickly nod—hoping she won’t misunderstand. “I’ll be fine,” I say, surprised by how hoarse my voice sounds.

I have no idea whether that’s a lie, but the *last* thing I want is to be manhandled by yet another Styx brother. Seeing the doubt on Bea’s face, I struggle to my feet.

For a moment, the dizziness intensifies. But then, thankfully, the world stops spinning.

Behind me, Hecate brings her hands together in a slow, sarcastic clap. “If you’re done with the theatrics, I need to get back to Luna,” she says. “I can’t believe you left her alone with those boys.”

“Luna’s her dog,” Bea explains, then addressing the witch adds, “If I’d brought her down to the beach, you’d be complaining that I’d risked her catching a chill.”

“Fair point,” Hecate admits. “Luna *does* have a delicate constitution.”

As I turn to face the witch, everything spins again. Bea grabs hold of my arm to stop me from crashing back down to the sand.

She frowns. “I think it’s the dress doing that to her.”

Hecate rolls her eyes. “Of course it’s the bloody dress.”

The next moment, I'm naked—save for my bra and underwear. Instantly, my vision clears and breathing becomes less of a struggle. Too bad the beach is freaking freezing.

I shiver in the cool ocean air, wondering why Bea chose such an inhospitable simulation. A few hundred yards of damp sand extend behind the witch before the ground slopes upward. Well beyond that, perched farther up the hillside, stands a massive stone mansion.

“Shit. I’m sorry. I should have thought to bring a change of clothes,” Bea says. “I didn’t realize that the dress would have such a bad effect on you.” She shoots Hecate a disapproving look. “You should have warned me.”

“Hey, the dress did its job.” The witch shrugs. “I’m not sure how you expected a garment capable of cross-realm travel to behave. But if the dress *hadn’t* been a bit tight, it wouldn’t have successfully kept her essence intact across dimensions. Anyway, if you were paying more attention to my lessons, you could conjure her something more suitable yourself.” Hecate waves a hand. “You’re welcome, by the way.”

Glancing down, I find that I’m now wearing jeans, a T-shirt, and a light hoody—and best of all, boots.

Hecate gestures toward the house in the distance. “Now shake a leg. I need to get back to Luna. My baby is *not* used to waiting this long for her lunch.”

As we make our way across the beach, I look from Bea to the witch. “So I take it Cornwall is in the same time zone as Elonia, then? Assuming that’s where we are.”

“Alyssa, Cornwall *is* Elonia… well, technically, it’s hard to explain…” Bea trails off, flustered.

“Easier to explain back at the house,” Hecate retorts. Then not waiting for a reply, she picks up her pace, striding ahead of us.

Now that I’m wearing normal clothes, I feel fine, surprisingly normal even. I hurry after Hecate, Bea at my side.

As we get closer to the rocky hillside, I see that a staircase of sorts has been carved into it. The stairs lead to a flagstone-paved terrace that runs the length of the rear of the house.

A few feet beyond the stairs, there appears to be a cave. A small campfire flickers on the beach a few yards in front of the cave’s entrance. Clustered around the fire is a small group of children, maybe six or seven in total. As I watch, they begin to sing a song, the words of which I can’t make out.

Curious, I drift nearer to the children, surprised when one by one they rise from their spots by the fire, slinging what appear to be pickaxes over their shoulders, still singing that strange song. As I get closer, I realize that the song they’re singing is in Greek—and that they aren’t children at all, but extremely short men.

I’m struggling to translate the lyrics, mentally cursing my Greek tutor for not being more thorough, when one of the men stops singing and points toward me. “She’s arrived!”

“You nincompoop, you say that every time a new woman comes here. You thought the fire-haired one was her too. She looks nothing like the queen.”

“You’re the nincompoop!” The first man shoves the second in the chest. “She wouldn’t look the same now, anyway.”

Freezing, I halt my progress toward the campfire and turn toward Bea, who’s still several feet behind me. “What are they talking about?”

Bea shakes her head, looking as confused as I feel.

Hecate, however, grabs my shoulders and turns me toward the staircase. “They’re dwarfs. Ignore them. Can’t trust anything they say. Besides, my baby is waiting.”

I want to protest, but something in the witch’s tone brooks no room for argument. Besides, do I really want to confront yet another mystery right now?

So deciding to ignore the squabbling men, I follow Hecate up the stone stairs, Bea just behind me, the air becoming slightly warmer as we ascend. Halfway up, I glance back down at the beach, but the dwarfs—if that’s what they are—have disappeared.

When we reach the terrace, the witch crosses it quickly and leads us through a set of open French doors. But the sight that meets us as we enter the house causes me to hesitate uncertainly in the doorway, even as Hecate makes a beeline for a posh sofa, scooping up a tiny black dog and cuddling it against her chest.

I don’t know what I was expecting, but it wasn’t *this*. No, not the strange little dog who, bizarrely, is wearing a red-sequined ballet tutu. Weird as that is, that isn’t the reason for my hesitation—Val is.

Because I recognize him right away—kind of hard to forget a guy after he nearly bites you. He’s lounging on another sofa, staring at a device that looks vaguely similar to a Lethe.

Sitting in a nearby chair, a book in hand—a *real* book, made out of actual paper—is a guy with curly dark hair and the soulful eyes of a poet. Even if I didn’t recognize Dante from Bea’s video call the other day, the familial resemblance between him and Bael is undeniable in person. In fact, it’s so obvious that I feel like a fool for not having connected the dots when Bea first introduced him.

Noticing my hesitation, Bea squeezes my arm and whispers in my ear, “Don’t worry Mal won’t bite.”

Despite Bea’s low tones, the blond guy glances up from his device and eyes me appraisingly. “Correction, I’ll only bite if she asks nicely,” he says, making eye contact and holding my gaze.

If Hecate’s eyes are the blue of a storm-tossed sea, this guy’s are the clear blue sky of a perfect summer day. There’s an innocence to them that’s at odds with his outrageous statement.

Willing myself not to blush, I look away and say, “Bael didn’t mention that Val had a twin.”

Seeming to just notice our presence, Dante looks up from his book, carefully placing a ribbon in it before closing it and setting it on a teak end table. “You’ve met Val?” He frowns. “When? He said he was staying on Crete.”

“Alyssa’s had a difficult journey,” Bea says before I can reply. “Why are you interrogating her?”

“Because he knows his brothers better than you, dear.” Hecate sets the dog down beside her on the sofa, shifting her focus to me and Bea. “Which means that he knows how *impulsive* they can be. And, yes, Val was also in the penthouse when I arrived, although I hadn’t realized that Bael had introduced them,” she says, eying me speculatively.

“Nothing happened!” I blurt out the denial without considering my words, immediately regretting them when Hecate gives me another calculating look.

She raises an eyebrow. “No one suggested that it had.”

Mercifully, Mal chooses that moment to stand. “Dante forced Cook to delay lunch until Bael’s girlfriend got here. But since you’ve arrived, gorgeous, I’ll go tell her that it’s time to eat.”

“I’m not his...” I begin, but Mal’s back is already disappearing through a doorway at the far end of the room.

Once more, Bea squeezes my arm. “Don’t mind Mal,” she says. “The twins are both terrible teases, but they’re harmless.”

I’m tempted to tell my friend exactly how “harmless” my encounter with her husband’s other brother was this morning, but she’s already crossing the room. A moment later, she reaches Dante, and taking his hand, drags him out of his chair. As he stands, Dante pulls Bea into a kiss that’s so intimate that I feel like a voyeur.

I turn to Hecate and fake a yawn. “I think I’d rather skip lunch. I’m honestly more tired than hungry. Is there somewhere I could lie down?”

I’m not actually lying. Mal referring to me as Bael’s *girlfriend* completely killed any appetite I might have had, despite still not having had breakfast.

“Yeah, *sure* you’re tired.” The witch sighs. “But Dante had a room prepared earlier, so if you’re going to be that way, it’s no skin off my nose.”

Relieved, I follow Hecate as she passes through the same doorway Mal did. But within moments, my relief is replaced with dismay as she leads me through a veritable labyrinth of finely appointed rooms and soaring halls.

As I follow her up a twisting staircase, I despair of ever finding my way back to the main rooms, realizing that I’m out of my depth. My familial estate is large, yes, but the floor plan is modern, logical. This...

Well, this feels more like a museum than a proper home.

As if reading my mind, Hecate says, “Just be thankful Dante selected one of the staterooms on the first floor. The second floor is even more of a nightmare.”

When I don’t reply, she adds, “Of course, navigating this pile of rocks will become old hat once you and Bael have been bonded a few decades. That is assuming you can drag him away from the Lotus on occasion.”

“Why does everyone keep acting as if Bael and I are somehow *together*? We barely know each other. And I do have a fiancé, you know.”

Hecate stops outside an ornate door and waves her hand. As the door swings open, seemingly of its own accord, she says, “That’s rather an involved discussion, and I need to get back downstairs to supervise Luna’s lunch. Mal can’t be trusted to check that Cook actually left the onions out of my baby’s steak tartare.”

Even if I wanted to force the issue, it’s too late. The witch is gone. Sighing, I step into the bedroom, pulling the door closed behind me.

The room Dante chose for me is just as gorgeous and overwhelming as the rest of the house. But before I can get too caught up in cataloging the details, I spot my luggage from the Lotus. Placed on top of it is the purse I took to dinner the night before. Jackpot.

Hurriedly, I cross the room and retrieve my Lethe from the purse. Ignoring the massive canopied bed, I take a seat in one of the delicate antique chairs placed in front of the room’s cold fireplace. Scrolling through the notifications, I feel a mixture of relief and disappointment.

Alex hasn’t attempted to contact me.

I stare at his profile photo, trying to think of a suitable text to send, unsure whether I even want to reach out to him. Manners dictate that I should send him *something*, at least if I want to try to salvage this match—if that’s even possible after the disappearing act I pulled last night. And yet...

Do I want to salvage it? Without a mate, my future in Elonia isn’t worth considering. Matching with Alex was my ticket to a tolerable life—the life I’ve always been meant to lead. Yet after kissing Bael again, after being bitten by him, after everything *else* that happened last night, the thought of that life fills me with dread. But what I said to Hecate was true: I barely know Bael.

I barely know him, and yet I can’t forget how I felt in his arms. I can’t forget the utter *rightness*, the sense of completion that filled me when his fangs pierced my neck.

It’s illogical, complete madness that my thoughts keep returning to a man I barely know, a man I certainly don’t understand. Last night, he seemed reluctant, damn near indifferent...

Until he wasn’t, until he ordered you onto your knees.

But is that what I want? To spend my life with a man who orders me around, who refers to me as his “responsibility”? A man who’s a monster, who’s told me as much, *shown* me as much? A man who drank my blood...

A man you want to bite you again.

I need to contact Alex. I owe him at least that much. Too bad I have absolutely no idea what to say.

A soft knock on the door spares me both from trying to write a text I’m unsure I even want to send and from fantasies of a man I know I need to forget. I open the door to find Bea, frowning and carrying a tray containing a plate of scones and a full tea service.

“Hecate said you wanted to lie down, but I figured you could use some breakfast. Besides, we really need to talk...”

BAEL

IN THE ELEVATOR, Ruby remains silent despite my attempts to engage her in conversation, bolting the second the doors slide open. Head still throbbing, I follow her.

As she makes her way across the lobby, toward the saloon, a ray of sunlight bounces off the silver collar around her neck and I wince. Not for the first time, I regret my complicity in Dad's treatment of my sisters.

Yes, they're dangerous. He's right that it would be unconscionable to allow them to wander freely in the mortal realms. But Ruby's no more to blame for her monstrosity than I am for mine. And yet I'm free and she's...

Your slave, Bael. Because you're too weak to refuse to do Daddy's dirty work.

Seeing Ruby is a potent reminder of the extent of my *actual* responsibilities. But now's not the time to wallow in my guilt over my role in my half-siblings' bondage. Not when Alyssa is missing and it's my fault. Not when Dad can help locate her. Priorities.

Ruby comes to a stop outside the swinging doors of Wild Willy's. "Tread carefully," she whispers, squeezing my shoulder before hurrying off.

I step into the saloon, scanning the room for my father. At this early hour, Willy's is practically empty. Yet it still takes me a moment to spot him in the bar's dim interior.

But finally my gaze lands on a lone figure in the corner, chair tipped back, the little light there is glinting off the soles of his hobnailed boots, which rest on the tabletop. An open bottle of Lagavulin sits on the table. I note the conspicuous absence of glasses—or even *a* glass.

Unease growing, I cross the saloon's sawdust floor. When I pull out the opposite chair and take my seat, Dad makes no move to remove his feet. I glance over at the bartender, but he avoids making eye contact, studiously polishing the already gleaming bottles arrayed in rows in front of the mirror that spans the space behind the bar.

It's just as well. While I do need a drink, alcohol won't abate the dull pounding in my skull. Only one thing will, and the sooner I conclude this interview, the sooner I can satisfy the curse's demands.

"Ruby said you wanted to speak with me," I say, voice neutral as I take in his black sunglasses, silk shirt, and leather pants.

Because that's the thing about my father. While he has a chameleon soul capable of blending in anywhere, he rarely deviates from whatever mode of mortal fashion he's currently enamored with. Still, given the dim lighting of the bar, the sunglasses are a bit much, even for him.

The front legs of his chair thud down, disturbing the sawdust, as he swings his boots to the floor. The sunglasses make his expression unreadable as he stares at me, not speaking.

I rub the bridge of my nose in a futile attempt to ease my headache. "I don't suppose you're going to explain why you went through the trouble of traveling here, yet couldn't be bothered to reply to any of my texts?"

"Some matters are too nuanced to translate into written form, particularly for one so literal minded as you."

My conversation with Hecate at dinner last night pops unbidden into my mind.

How does it feel to be too literal minded to understand the difference between metaphor and a harmless fucking fruit?

"My inability to understand metaphors seems to be a running joke. Hecate recently referred to the thing with Mom and the pomegranate seeds as 'horse shit' and accused me of being as gullible as Dante."

He shakes his head. "If you fell for that one, too, then you *are* as gullible as him. Zeus's balls, I raised a bunch of morons."

When I simply glare and don't reply, he sighs. "The seeds were *symbolism*. Six sons, six seeds, get it?"

"Wait. You're claiming *we* were the reason you trapped Mom in hell half the year? It wasn't because she ate of the fruit of the underworld?"

"Well, not *literally* but... look, when we couldn't reconcile our differences, her spending one month in Hades for each of you boys was the compromise my brother came up with."

"So you're saying you lied to us?"

"Your brother leveled that same accusation, and I have to say it's getting old. Did *I* ever tell you that story? No. It's not my fault if you chose to listen to rumors and gossip. Use your head, boy. Have you ever seen anyone else become trapped in Hades after eating the food served at the palace? But I didn't come here to argue about the past."

"Why *are* you here?"

"Because you're blowing it. I practically gift wrap the chit for you, and you fucking lose her?"

I take a deep breath. Losing my temper will get me nowhere. "Sending Calypso to assassinate Alyssa is hardly what I would call a gift—not that I asked for one."

"Oh, so you're on a first-name basis with the girl already? Excellent."

His comment makes me realize that I don't actually know Alyssa's surname. In vain, I try to recall the details of her reservation.

"We barely know each other."

He shakes his head. "And yet you seem to be terribly invested in her welfare. Fascinating."

"No. The only thing I'm invested in is my father not trying to kill mortals who are guests at my resort!"

"Oh really, that's the extent of your interest in her?" He snaps his fingers, and a cell phone appears in his hand. No, not a cell phone, one of the comm devices from Alyssa's world, which are, ironically, referred to as Lethes.

He takes a drink from the bottle of Lagavulin, then starts reading aloud from some document he's pulled up on the Lethe. I bury my face in my hands, groaning as he rattles off everything from Alyssa's measurements to her academic achievements, finally concluding with, "And according to the mirror daemon, she's also the fairest in the land."

I look up at him. "Are you through? Because frankly, you sound like a stalker."

"No, not at all. The girl isn't my type. I'm merely a concerned parent doing due diligence on my offspring's future bride."

This last comment is too much. "What the fuck, Dad?" I push back my chair and stand. Holding up a finger, I say, "One, Alyssa has a fiancé—"

He cuts me off. "Inconvenient, but easily enough remedied."

Ignoring him, I hold up a second finger. "And two, even if she didn't, I have no intention of proposing to her. As soon as I have your word that she won't be subjected to any more divine interference, my interest in her ends."

"And yet she spent the night in your bed. Again, *fascinating*."

I grip the back of the chair I just vacated, knuckles white. "Because she begged me to help her break an attraction charm caused by cursed combs with gems on them from *one of your mines*."

My father raises an eyebrow. "You really expect me to fall for that? You wanted to bed her or you wouldn't have. It's as simple as that. You're too stubborn for anyone to make you do something you don't want to do, no matter how fair of face she might be."

"Really? Because I sure as hell don't want to spend my morning in a bloody bar, yet here I am."

At this, he removes his sunglasses, revealing swirling red orbs. "Sit," he orders, voice deeper, putting all the power of hell behind that one word.

Gritting my teeth, I obey. I have no other choice.

Calling our father "a complicated man" is like calling a hurricane "a tiny spot of rain." His public persona, particularly among mortals, is so insouciant that it can be easy to forget that he rules over the most terrible of all the realms. And that he governs it with an iron fist.

Ruby's nervousness earlier suddenly makes sense. When Dad gets into a mood like this...

He replaces his sunglasses. "Now if you're through acting like a spoiled brat..." Two glasses appear on the table. He gestures for me to pour the whisky.

Wishing it were blood, or even water, I nevertheless do as he bids. Pointing at the glasses, he continues.

"Islay single malt Scotch, one of the finer pleasures mortals have contrived. And yet we both know that given a choice, you'd choose to gulp down mortal blood like some kind of animal instead."

"You know it's not a choice. It's your goddamn fault I'm this way, *your sin I'm paying*—"

"Precisely. Which is why I found the girl for you, to atone. So stop being so fucking ungrateful."

"I'm sorry, Dad, but your morality is fucked. Attempted murder is hardly what most would call atonement."

He shrugs. "You say tomato. I say... apple."

The subtle threat in the last word isn't lost on me.

"Amidst her insults last night, Hecate mentioned something about a 'Snow White gambit,' but she refused to elaborate. What the hell was she talking about?" I ask, suspecting I already know.

For a moment, it seems as if he'll refuse to reply. When he finally does, his tone is way too airy for my peace of mind. "Oh, that's just her stupid name for this plan Aphrodite came up with to push you and the girl together."

"Elaborate," I say, clutching my glass but making no move to bring it to my lips.

"Relax." He waves a hand dismissively. "Hecate talked me out of using the apple. It's why I went with the hair combs instead. But it's all irrelevant now. Since you and the girl have clearly been successfully 'brought together,' it's only a matter of time before you see sense and complete the ritual."

"How many times do I have to tell you—"

Once again, he cuts me off. "You said you weren't going to propose. But there's more than one way to skin a cat. Just because Dante was old-fashioned doesn't mean you have to follow that path. Nothing in Aphrodite's curse said you had to *marry* your fated mate before completing the ritual."

When I simply stare at him, he continues. "And hey, I'm modern, I get it." He removes his sunglasses once more and winks as he places them on the table. His eyes are an ordinary brown now, but that's somehow even more unsettling. "Honestly, I thought Dante's insistence on having that boring handfasting ceremony *first* was a bloody waste of time, but what do you expect? He slept so long he's basically a walking anachronism. Hopefully, that redhead chit will get him up to speed soon."

I shake my head. "Well, regardless, I'm not performing the ritual with Alyssa either."

"Why the fuck not?"

“Because what if you’re wrong?” Releasing my glass, I slam my hand on the table in frustration, voice louder than I intend.

The bartender coughs and moves farther away.

Dad stares into his glass for a moment, then replies, voice soft, “We both know that I’m not. What’s your actual objection, Bael?”

“Where is she, Dad?”

He smiles, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. “Tell me your objection and the information is yours.”

“You really want to know?” I hiss. “Because unlike your sham of a marriage, the ritual is forever. And the last thing I want to do is end up like you. I don’t even know her. She’s barely out of the schoolroom with her entire life before her. And yet you want me to bind our souls together for eternity?”

“I never took you for a coward, son.”

“I’m not—”

He shakes his head. “Every mortal eventually travels through my gates. Do you have any idea how many of them pass out of this life filled with regret? Don’t let her be yours. Take some time if you must, get to know her first, but fucking grow a pair.”

“How? You still haven’t told me where she is,” I protest.

“Dante’s entertaining her at the Cornwall estate. Poetic really, given the dwarfs’ superstitions.” He raises his glass. “To ending the curse.”

When I make no move to join his toast, a hobnailed boot kicks me under the table.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t agree to this.” I shake my head. “I don’t even *know* her, Dad, let alone know whether I love her. It’s too great a risk.”

“And what would you know of love, Bael?” He eyes me thoughtfully. “That cunt fucked you up, stunted your emotional growth by cursing you so young. Don’t think I haven’t watched you over the years. You’ve never let a woman close enough to discover whether you could love her or not.”

“You’re really blaming that on Aphrodite?” I ask, voice tight. “Has it ever occurred to you that *you* fucked me up, as you so crassly put it? That you and Mom were an object lesson in the perils of *that* particular emotion?”

“Don’t be so arrogant as to think that you can know the truth of a relationship from the outside. You know *nothing* of my and Kore’s feelings for each other.”

A hint of red reappears in his eyes as he speaks, and I know that I should choose my next words carefully. But while my father may be a snake, forever twisting the truth, manipulating all around him to see the world his way, I’m not him. I *won’t* be him. Because I’m my mother’s son too—or was.

“Whatever your feelings may have been at one point, hers were clear enough at the end. She took her own life rather than remain bound to you. And that’s what you’re asking me to do, Dad. Bind another

innocent to this fucked-up family merely to ease your conscience.”

Past fights have me expecting him to lash out, to set the whole saloon aflame. I’m bracing for the explosion, mentally rehearsing the likely spells I’ll need for damage control.

So it throws me off balance when his eyes return to their normal color and he seems to almost collapse in on himself, a deep weariness settling over his ageless features. “It hurts, Bael, that you misinterpret my motivations so badly. Kore isn’t the only one I love.”

I don’t reply. I know my father too well to fall for his act.

Seeming to realize that I won’t take the bait, he straightens in his chair and pushes the glass toward me, a look of grim resolution on his face. “While I’m used to being misunderstood, understand this: you will attempt the ritual with this girl, or Aphrodite’s apple is back in play. Now drink.”

Whatever my father might claim, I’m *not* a coward. But denying the devil when he’s determined to strike a deal is easier said than done, particularly when he’s your father.

I lift my glass of whisky a few inches off the table and mutter “cheers.” A lead weight settles in my stomach.

“Then it’s settled,” Dad says, downing the contents of his glass before continuing. “You’ll join the chit in Cornwall—where you’ll properly woo her. Don’t take too long, though. Mortal lives can be terribly... fragile.”

A loud *pop* resounds and every piece of glass in the saloon shatters. Not the fireworks I feared earlier, but still an inconvenient mess.

“Fucking hell!” the bartender exclaims. He turns toward me, face panicked. “You saw what happened, Lord Bael. It wasn’t my—”

Standing, I hold up a hand to silence his protests. “It’s fine, Sam. I’ll send a crew over to deal with it.”

His reply is lost on me, however, as I catch a glimpse of my fractured reflection in the bar’s shattered mirror. My eyes look as lost as I feel. What the hell did I just agree to?

Performing the ritual with Alyssa is out of the question. But breaking a deal with the devil is... unadvisable. Head pounding once more, I take out my phone and dial the number for the Cornwall estate.

ALYSSA

BRUSHING a crumb onto the now-empty plate on the table between us, I stare at Bea. “Let me make sure I have this straight. You’re telling me that you performed some sort of satanic ritual on your wedding night, and that as a result, Dante is no longer a vampire and you’re some sort of goddess?”

“I know how it sounds,” Bea says. “But yeah, basically... except the ritual isn’t satanic. Dante’s dad didn’t come up with it. Aphrodite did.”

“Of the two of us, I’m supposed to be the pedant, Bea. But fine—you performed an *Aphroditian* ritual, then. And it really broke the curse, like you two are legit soul mates?” I ask, still trying to wrap my head around the whole thing.

“Well, I’m not sure that Dante has ever used the term soul mate... or really how souls play into this at all.” She pauses, looking thoughtful for a moment, then adds, “But if soul mates are a thing, then Dante is definitely mine. We were fated to be together.”

“You’re saying that you somehow ‘knew’ that you were ‘fated’ to be with this guy after you’d only known him for a few days?” I ask, failing to keep the scorn out of my voice.

“Yes, Alyssa, that’s what I’m saying,” she replies with a hint of exasperation. “Hecate told us what happened last night. I’m not sure why you’re having so much trouble believing me.”

“Umm, what does last night have to do with you and Dante?”

“It’s not obvious?” She shoots me a pitying look. “Bael is your Dante. Or at least he will be once you two perform the ritual.”

I nearly choke on my tea. “What? Says who?”

“Hecate, for one. And Hades agrees with her.”

“Oh, well, if your new bestie says so, then I guess it must be true.” I roll my eyes. “Better have your hubby call up his brother then and tell him to get his ass out here and bite me ASAP.”

“Actually, Bael just called,” a deep voice says from the doorway.

This time, I *do* choke on my tea. Bea takes the cup from my shaking hand and calmly places it on the table.

As I'm struggling to regain my composure, Dante continues. "He has some stuff to take care of at the Lotus first, but he says he'll try to arrive in time for dinner. I figured you'd want to know," he finishes, voice apologetic.

Bea smiles at him. "Thanks, hun. We appreciate it. Can you give us a bit longer?"

"Of course," he replies, softly closing the door behind him.

Her husband gone, Bea's smile disappears. "What did you mean by 'my new bestie'?" she demands. "You know that you and Lora are my number one girls."

"You sure haven't been acting like it," I reply, unable to keep the hurt out of my voice. "You didn't even invite us to the wedding."

"Is that what this is about?" she asks. "I already told you, Dante didn't want to invite any guests, in case..."

"In case the ritual failed," I say, completing the sentence she doesn't have the nerve to finish. "And you just went and took that chance. We wouldn't have even gotten to say goodbye."

Bea stares at me. "Oh my god, are you actually crying?"

"No." I brush a tear away. "Okay, maybe. But this is serious. You could have died, Bea!"

"But I didn't," she says, voice calm.

"So? Dante clearly thought there was a risk. And yet you went ahead with it without even telling us."

"Yeah, and I'm sorry about that. I really wanted you there, but you would have tried to talk me out of it."

"Of course I would have tried to talk you out of it! That's what friends *do*! They don't let you risk your life for a guy you just met."

Bea sighs. "That's not how it was, and you know it."

"I know no such thing," I reply, voice hard.

"Oh really? You're telling me that when Bael kissed you, when he *bit* you, you didn't feel anything?"

Screw your honor. You don't feel this?

My face heats as I remember our argument the night before. Of course I felt something. Every time we touch, it's as if a circuit is completed, as if I've found a part of me that I never knew existed. It's why I can't get him out of my head, why I haven't texted Alex yet...

But instead I say, "That's lust, nothing more. Sexual chemistry isn't *that* rare. And it causes a brief surge in dopamine and oxytocin. I learned about it at finishing school. It's why you're not supposed to kiss anyone who's not your assigned mate."

"A surge in dopamine and oxytocin? That's what you're gonna pretend your magic responding to his is, seriously?"

I frown. “Magic?”

“Why do you think I’ve been spending so much time with Hecate? She’s been teaching me how to use mine.” Bea shrugs. “She’s actually pretty cool once you get to know her, although she can still be kind of a lot. But I want to get a handle on some basic spells before we go on our actual honeymoon, and she’s the best teacher I could ask for.”

“Umm, back up,” I say. “You’re a goddess or whatever now, so I guess I’ll buy that you have magic. But what does this have to do with me and Bael?”

“*All* living beings have magic, Alyssa. It’s just almost impossible to consciously control it if you’re not immortal. And even then... well, let’s just say that Dante is kind of crap at most spells. Which is why I figured one of us should have some proficiency before we start hopping between realms without Hecate holding our hands.”

“Whatever,” I mutter, suddenly exhausted. “Just because you’re learning some spells doesn’t mean that there’s anything more between me and Bael than some overactive hormones.”

“I wish I knew why you were fighting this.”

“Uh, maybe because I have a fiancé? One who will probably think I dropped off the face of the Earth if I don’t text him soon.” I reach for my Lethe.

“Well, technically, you have,” she says with a sheepish expression.

“Explain.”

“Umm, well remember when I said that Cornwall was technically Elonia?”

Ignoring my growing sense of misgiving, I nod.

“So it’s like this...” She hesitates.

“Spill, Bea. What else have you been keeping from me?”

“I was just about to tell you!” she protests. “At some point, there was an accident with a pretty powerful particle accelerator—”

“Particle accelerators are just theoretical,” I point out. “No one has actually ever made one.”

“No one in *our* world has made one. But in the original mortal realm they did, and there was an accident that caused reality to basically, uh, fracture.”

“The *original* mortal realm?” I ask, my misgivings growing.

Because I’m pretty sure I know where this is going. Bael and Hecate’s bizarre comments last night suddenly make sense—comments I failed to fully process while under the influence of the attraction charm. But now, Bea has my undivided attention.

“That’s how I’ve been thinking of it, at least. I mean, as you pointed out, particle accelerators don’t exist in our world. So obviously some of the worlds are derivative.” She wrinkles her nose. “Not sure if that’s the right way to put it. Physics was never my strong suit.”

“So you’re telling me that there are multiple worlds? And if I’m reading between the lines right, that we’re *not* in the one where Elonia is?” I ask, Bea’s earlier comments suddenly taking on a whole new meaning.

“Pretty much, yeah. That’s why Hecate has had so much trouble getting the Lethe to work here. Honestly, I’m not sure you’ll even be *able* to text Alex. It took half a dozen different spells before she could get mine to work well enough to place that video call.”

Glancing down at my Lethe, I check my notifications. But nothing new has come in the entire time we’ve been talking. That never happens. I should be getting the auto-generated updates about the transit system back in Elonia, if nothing else.

Sighing, I set my Lethe down. “Can we backtrack for a minute?”

“Sure. What do you want to know?”

“You specified that the *mortal* realm fractured. I take that to mean that there is an immortal realm as well?”

At this, she looks surprised. “Well, I’ve never heard anyone use that term, but yeah. Or at least there are god realms and liminal realms, which I guess technically would be the same thing.”

“God realms like Hades?” I ask, fitting the pieces together, remembering the part of Bea’s story where she claimed to have descended into hell.

She nods. “Exactly.”

“And what would a liminal realm be? Some kind of intermediate state between god realms and mortal realms?”

“Now you’re finally getting it!”

“Give me an example of one.”

Bea smiles. “You just left one, silly. The Lotus.”

I’m Bael Styx, and you’re in the penthouse of the Lotus... which I own. Leaning back in my chair, I close my eyes. Bael said that he was a god, admitted that he was the son of Hades, so I’m not sure why finding out that he “owns” an entire realm is the thing that bothers me.

But somehow, it does.

Slowly, I open my eyes. “So what you’re saying is that the man you’re claiming is my *fated mate* controls an entire realm? The same guy who treated me like his freaking possession, who claims I’m his ‘responsibility,’ is some kind of all-powerful deity?”

“Well, ‘all-powerful’ may be a bit much,” Bea says slowly. “I mean the Lotus isn’t *that* big of a realm, but yeah... he *is* more powerful than Dante, if that’s what you’re asking, why?”

I frown. “Have you even met him, Bea?”

“No, not yet... But Dante’s mentioned that he can be a bit of a, umm, control freak. And the twins admittedly used more colorful language. Why do you think we persuaded Hecate to break you out of the Lotus this morning?”

I shake my head. “I honestly have no idea. Why *did* you bring me here, Bea, when you could have just come to the Lotus without Hecate engaging in all of that cloak and dagger crap?”

“It isn’t obvious? Because I wanted you to see what you’d be missing if you insist on choosing Alex. And Dante claimed that Bael would never tell you.”

I glance around the bedroom in confusion. “What? You thought a posh mansion would convince me to reject my assigned mate and risk my life for some dude I just met?”

“Alyssa... you didn’t notice anything about the beach?”

“Other than that it was the coldest, dampest simulation I ever...” I pause, understanding dawning.

“Wait. None of this is a simulation, is it?”

BAEL

SUNLIGHT SPARKLES on the white-capped waves in the distance. I want to smash my fist through the library window, or barring that, at least look away. But I can't.

Because on the terrace below, Dante sits in quiet conversation with Alyssa. On the table before them, his book lies forgotten. My brother's full attention is focused on her, his bride nowhere in sight.

In genuine sunlight, she's even more gorgeous than she appeared beneath the Lotus's artificial sun. Black as ebony, her hair cascades down her shoulders, blowing in a breeze I can't feel.

My cock strains against my trousers at the sight of her. Hell, I've been half-hard all day, unable to stop thinking about last night, about the impossible act my father is determined I'll commit, the act that if I'm being honest, I *want* to commit.

We are so incredibly fucked. Between this pull between us and my father's interference, finishing what we started last night feels increasingly inevitable.

Still, I'm determined to keep my hands off her, at least until we can properly talk. She deserves an explanation for what's happened, what seems doomed to happen now that my dad has made his position clear.

Of course, she's making that damnable difficult when she seems determined to remain outside. Observing her through the library window makes me feel more than a little like a stalker, but summoning her into the house would be the wrong move.

I'm not yours, Bael Styx. Not your possession and not your responsibility.

The problem, however, is that she *is* my responsibility. For better or worse, my father's interest in her has made sure of that.

My heart catches in my throat as she looks up at my brother, her face rapt in the sunlight. Her rose-red lips curl in a smile at something Dante says. The entire tableau only serves to remind me of my own monstrosity, and yet I can't look away.

Because I'm realizing that I could stare at Alyssa for hours and never grow bored. No woman has ever made me feel this way, and yet my inner voice of reason is screaming that it's too soon. Too soon to feel this intensely about someone, too soon to let thoughts of her dominate my mind.

“You know, they say that idle hands are the devil’s tools,” a feminine voice drawls from behind me.

Turning, I glare at Hecate but say nothing.

Unfazed, the witch cranes her head around me and takes in the view below. “Ooh, now I see what’s got your undies in a twist. Little brother is encroaching on your girl. I always figured you’d be the jealous type—at least once a woman finally struck your fancy. It’s gratifying to discover that I was right. On all counts. Even if you are being an idiot.”

“Did you want something, Hecate?”

“I’m merely curious as to why *you* are up here, and *she* is down there.”

“Have you forgotten the part where I can’t set foot beneath the sun?”

“That only answers half my question, and not the most interesting half. By and by the way, I heard about your deal with Styx. Not your brightest move, fang boy.”

“How?” I demand.

She shrugs. “Sam can be awfully chatty when the mood strikes him.”

“And what exactly did Sam tell you, pray tell?”

“Ooh, only that a certain someone was dumb enough to seal a deal with the old goat.”

Not replying, I turn back toward the window, only to find the terrace empty. But a moment later, I spy two small figures walking along the shore, heads inclined toward each other.

Growling in frustration, I pull the curtains closed. “If you’ve come here just to mock me, you can get lost.”

The witch disappears. But before I can breathe a sigh of relief, she reappears in a wingback chair on the far side of the room.

“Take a seat, fang boy,” she snaps, pointing to the chair beside hers. “We need to chat.”

After the morning I’ve had, the last thing I’m in the mood for is a lecture from the witch. At the same time, I could use her advice. Because for some reason, Alyssa seems to trust her—or at least enough to willingly accompany her to Cornwall.

Heart heavy, I cross the room and take the chair Hecate indicated. “I’m listening.”

“First, answer my question. Why is the woman you told Styx you’d bite taking a romantic stroll with your little brother?”

“Fuck if I know,” I grumble, hating how petulant I sound.

“While I have always suspected that you shared your father’s possessive streak, I never took you for the passive type.”

“Need I remind you again? Vampire. Sunlight. No *bueño*.”

“Given that you swore an oath you know your father will most certainly collect, I’d expect you to have a greater sense of urgency, daylight or not,” she replies. “Sam told me the terms. You fail to complete the ritual, Styx comes at the girl with your least favorite fruit.”

“All facts of which I’m well aware. That still doesn’t mean that I’m going to rush into this blind. I’m not attempting the ritual until we at least explore whatever the hell this is between us.

“Gods, you’re uptight. You’ve bitten her. You’ve bedded her—well, sort of. What in Hades is there left to explore?”

“How is it ‘uptight’ to not want to risk turning an innocent mortal into a soulless zombie?”

“Oh, please, give me a break,” Hecate retorts. “You’ve seen Dante’s bride. Does Bea look like a zombie to you?”

“Yeah, and she’s what? His fiftieth wife?” I counter. “I lost count after the first dozen failures, which proves my point. It’s too damn risky to rush.”

“Bullshit,” the witch says flatly. “It’s a sure thing. *I* found her for you, after all. And I’m *never* wrong about magic.”

“But you admitted the other night that this *isn’t* magic. It’s computer hacking, and you’re *not* an expert in that.”

“You foolish boy.” She shakes her head. “For the truly gifted, there’s a point where mortal technology and magic converge, particularly when daemons are involved. And luckily for you, the mortal authorities in that world have become foolishly reliant on daemons or I’d never have discovered either girl.”

“I’m afraid that I don’t follow.”

Hecate winks. “Let’s just say an astonishing amount can be accomplished if one knows the correct command spells for a magic mirror.”

“But can it actually determine whether she’s my fated mate?”

“No, but it can make an educated guess with an astonishingly high degree of probability.” She shrugs. “Real life isn’t the Lotus. You can’t micromanage everything. Sometimes you simply have to take a leap of faith.”

I want to strangle the witch just to wipe the smug expression off her face, but instead I find myself saying, “Hecate, help me. Because I have no fucking clue what I’m doing, let alone whether it’s a mistake. And I don’t know what to do with that because *I always* know what I’m doing.”

“From my vantage point, you appear to be falling in love. I have to admit, though, that watching you moon after the girl is getting a bit nauseating.”

“That isn’t what I meant,” I protest.

The witch raises an eyebrow. “Then what *do* you mean?”

“Look,” I say, “I control every last detail of my realm—from personally vetting all hires to ensuring that nothing *dangerous* makes its way into the kitchens to negotiating contracts with visiting shades. No, I don’t always get it absolutely right—as that debacle with replacing demon celebrity impersonators with ‘the real thing’ proved—but when things do go wrong, it’s my fault. My mistake to correct. My vision to restore.”

“Uh-huh, and...”

“And my *vision* has never included falling for a girl barely out of the schoolroom. Let alone one from a version of the mortal world that I don’t understand.”

“And yet here you are, so stop fighting it.”

“Why can’t you understand?” I shake my head. “Gods falling for mortals has always been a losing proposition. But becoming entangled with one from a dystopian world whose future has been preordained by some fucking computer program? Vegas has better odds.”

“No, why can’t *you* understand, Bael Styx? I’m telling you that she *is* the one. So grow a spine and perform the fucking ritual before the choice is taken from you.”

“I’m not going to force her,” I say. “I’m not my father.”

“And thank Zeus for that small favor, but there are oceans of possibilities between behaving like Hades and... well, Tom.”

“Who the fuck is Tom?”

“T.S. Eliot, who I’ll have you know is still as indecisive in death as he was in life.”

“Get to the point, Hecate.”

“Woo her.”

“How!”

“Gods, do I have to do *everything*? I already found her for you and lured her to your little realm.”

“Yeah, and then kidnapped her and dragged her here—where it’s a thousand times easier for her to avoid me.”

“It hasn’t occurred to you that I executed that particular plan for your sake?” The witch gives me a pitying look. “You’ve been so wrapped up in overseeing your realm for so long that you’ve barely set foot outside it. I thought you could use a reminder.”

“A reminder of what?”

“Maybe that there’s more to life than crafting spell work that has no purpose other than to make mortals more dissatisfied with their lots in life?” She sighs. “Or that there are multiple other realms out there? Realms that you could fully experience again if you weren’t too stubborn to seize what’s right in front of you.”

It pains me to admit it, but the witch has a point.

Yes, some of my guests leave inspired to do great things. But for plenty of others, a stay at the Lotus provides nothing more than a nudge onto the path of damnation. And, sure, some are already damned before they step through my doors. But many, too many, arrive in search of a golden ticket, a way out.

Not that I can blame them, particularly those from the more dystopian of the mortal realms. How *can* I blame them when I have all the realms between heaven and hell spread before me and still want more? Still want... something real.

As real as her skin glowing in the sunlight...

“Anyway,” the witch says, interrupting my thoughts, “I didn’t just come up here to bust your balls. I saw you eyeing this on the beach, and after Sam told me what you were up to, well... I figured you might have a use for it.”

Hecate holds out her hand. I stare at the small object resting on her palm, but make no move to take it.

“Relax, fang boy, I deactivated the hedge witch’s spells. It’s perfectly harmless now.”

I hesitate a moment longer, then accept the witch’s offering, stowing it safely in my front pocket. While I’m unsure I’ll take the hint and propose, the gemstones have given me an idea, and suddenly, I know what I need to do.

“Thank you,” I say, hoping Hecate can hear my genuine gratitude in the two words. “For everything. It’s more than I deserve.”

“I’m not doing any of this for you, fang boy. Or your father, for that matter. It’s what Kore would want,” she replies, looking away.

At the witch’s mention of my mother, my confidence in my plan falters. But I push the doubts aside. I am *not* my father. And it’s not as if I plan to abduct Alyssa. Well, not exactly...

ALYSSA

A CIRCLE OF LAWN CHAIRS, empty save for two, surrounds an unlit fire pit. Far beyond our small circle, the sun sinks into the Atlantic as the witch and I wait for the others to join us on the south lawn.

Bea and Dante left to procure something they referred to as “takeout.” Mal is nowhere in sight, but then I suppose he wouldn’t be—not with the sun still at least partially in the sky.

When Dante and I returned from our walk, Bea informed us that Dante had arrived, but I still haven’t seen him. I half wonder whether he’s avoiding me, but the rational part of my brain reminds me that he’s as unlikely as Mal to join us before darkness falls. How could he?

So that just leaves me and the witch. Well, me, the witch, and her little dog too.

Luna and I regard each other with mutual suspicion. Other than the tour Bea forced me to take of the Lotus’s menagerie, I’ve never been around a live animal before today, and I’m not sure how I feel about the dog. Unlike my friend, who studied non-human animals at university, I’ve never really had any interest in them. Why would I when they’re effectively extinct?

Well, in *my* world, at least. I’m still trying to wrap my mind around this multiple worlds thing. Bea left me with a lot to think about.

So did Dante.

After my heart-to-heart with Bea, I realized that I needed to talk to someone with more romantic experience than my best friend. Because no matter how much I pressed her, she couldn’t explain how she’d known that Dante was “the one” beyond a weak “sometimes you just know.”

Her answer wasn’t reassuring, particularly in light of her husband’s romantic history, which she only confessed when I questioned to her as to *why* he’d been in an enchanted sleep for over a hundred years.

Because it turns out that Bea isn’t Dante’s first wife, nor even his second or third. Prior to her, he performed the ritual with dozens of women, believing each to be his fated mate. And each time, the ritual failed.

So unwilling to risk falling in love again and making another mistake, he basically poisoned himself, drinking a potion Hecate brewed. His plan was to sleep forever, but the witch left a loophole where his drugged slumber *could* be broken—but only by true love’s kiss.

So in one way, Hecate assured that he'd have an external indicator proving that whichever woman woke him was "the one." Still, with a romantic track record like that, his reluctance to invite any guests to their wedding suddenly makes perfect sense.

But I needed to hear the story from *his* point of view, needed to know whether Bea awakening him from that slumber was the only way he'd known that it was different this time. So I asked him.

His answer has given me a lot to think about. Too much. Thankfully, Hecate seems disinclined to conversation, pensively staring off into the distance. Every so often, she glances down when Luna drops a ball at her feet, tossing it wordlessly for the now sweater-clad dog.

Shivering, I run my hands up and down my bare arms, wishing I'd thought to dress as sensibly as Luna. Because of the grandiosity of the estate as a whole, I assumed dinner would be at least a semi-formal affair and made the mistake of changing into a sleeveless summer dress more suitable for the Lotus's desert climate than the English coast. I only realized my error after Bea led me through the maze of ground-floor rooms and through a set of French doors that opened onto the lawn.

The south lawn is as gorgeous and intimidating as the rest of the estate. Meticulously manicured grass dotted by small trees extends for several hundred yards before transitioning into beautifully tended tiered gardens that cascade down to the sea. Too bad it's freezing and getting colder by the minute.

Still silent, the witch waves a hand at the fire pit, and it comes to life. The flickering flames warm the surrounding air more than seems possible, more than likely *is* possible without magic.

Magic.

Apparently, that's a large part of how Dante *knew*. Of course, Dante has lived his whole life immersed in a world where magic is real. I'm still struggling to figure out what's magic and what's hormones.

But what if Bea is right and what I felt with Bael *is* more than simple biology? Until yesterday, I would have claimed it was impossible, that magic doesn't exist, but the evidence of my senses argues otherwise. The fire warming me now is proof enough, let alone everything else...

So much has happened in the past twenty-four hours that it's difficult to comprehend. This time yesterday, I was walking along the Lotus's beach with Alex, my future mapped out for me. How has everything changed so completely in such a short span of time?

A week ago, I didn't even know Bael existed. And until last night, I thought my encounter with him was an anomaly, a moment to be trapped in amber, preserved in the past. Just one kiss. Sure, a kiss I'd look back on with fondness and maybe a little regret, but in the end, it was just a kiss.

Except then Bael bit me. He bit me because I begged him to, then made me feel things I never thought possible. He bit me and what would have happened if Hecate hadn't interrupted us? Would I be immortal like Bea now or simply dead?

"While I knew Cornwall couldn't live up to the party atmosphere on Crete, Dante didn't tell me he was inviting me to a funeral. Who died?" Val asks, taking the chair to my right.

I stare at him in surprise, realizing that night has fallen while I've sat here lost in thought. While I can still hear the ocean in the distance, the panoramic view has faded out of sight thanks to the starless night. But a mix of lanterns and fairy lights have flickered on in the trees scattered across the lawn, and I have a clear view of Bael's brother.

As I examine him more closely, I realize that there are several subtle differences between Val and his twin that I missed earlier. Mostly in the form of piercings and tattoos. As in Mal has a ton where Val has more of a surfer vibe going on.

I feel foolish for having mistaken Mal for him, although not as foolish as I felt when Bea pointed out that I hadn't noticed that we weren't beneath a dome, that the overcast sky the witch deposited me beneath wasn't a simulation, that the seabirds I'd spied were as real as her and I.

"Oh, come on," Val says in a wheedling tone. "Don't tell me you're still pissed about earlier?"

"What would she be pissed about?" Mal asks, coming up behind me and taking the chair on my other side.

"None of your business, little brother," Val replies.

"Eleven fucking minutes!" Mal exclaims. "When are you gonna bloody let that go?"

"Maybe when you stop acting like a nosy little brother?"

"Hey! Could one of you brats give me a hand?"

I turn to see Dante standing by the house, a stack of white boxes balanced on one hand, several bags slung over his other arm. The bags are made of some unfamiliar filmy white material. And the boxes appear to be made out of... paper?

"What is he carrying?" I ask Hecate as the twins hurry over to relieve Dante of his packages.

"Looks like enough pizza and Chinese food to feed an army." She rolls her eyes. "A bit excessive since you're the only one here who actually *needs* to eat mortal fare. Well, so does my Luna baby, not that I would feed her that junk."

"I meant the containers. What are they made of? I've never seen those materials before—wait. What do you mean I'm the only one here who needs to eat?"

"The boxes are cardboard. The bags are plastic. And if I had to guess, the containers inside them are Styrofoam," the witch replies, voice bored. "Although if the mortals in this universe don't cut that crap soon, their world is going to be as fucked as yours. Now do you require a full chemistry lesson, or would you rather I answer your other question?"

Knowing I'll never keep all the new terms straight, I opt to focus on what is likely the more relevant topic if I'm to have any hope of understanding this bizarre family that I've somehow been dragged into. "The other one, please."

"Well, that's easier at least, although I'm surprised you have to ask it, given your major. While gods may enjoy mortal delicacies—or in this case, junk food—we don't *need* that sort of physical sustenance. But as the twins are basically divine garbage disposals, Dante probably gauged the

amount of food correctly.”

“Garbage what?”

The witch rolls her eyes. “Look, I speak a few dozen human languages and can cast a translation spell for the rest. But I can’t be expected to keep up with the divergences in vocabulary since you lot went and broke *your* realm.”

Okay then... I decide not to press it, figuring I can just ask Bea later. Hecate’s defensiveness makes me wonder, though, whether she’s *always* this prickly or if something’s happened to put her into such a bad mood.

But at that moment, Bea calls us over to a table that’s been set up near the house. When I reach her, however, I hesitate when confronted with the array of strange options that bear no resemblance to either the meals I’ve had at the Lotus or the food served under the dome. Mal intervenes, though, piling a plate with more food than I could possibly eat and handing it to me.

“Umm, thanks,” I say, accepting the plate.

“My pleasure,” he says. “I’m always happy to help a pretty girl, particularly a dome chick.”

“Watch it, bro,” Val warns. “Bael’s already laid dibs on her.”

Mal shrugs. “If he’s that interested in her, he should show up on time, then. Shouldn’t he? No ring, she’s fair game.”

“Ignore them,” Bea says, taking my arm and steering me back toward the fire pit. “I promise, they get less overwhelming with time. They’re really all talk.”

As dinner progresses, the truth of Bea’s statement becomes clear—well, the second half of it, at least. The twins really do seem to be harmless jokers, even if they are shameless flirts. The bond between them and their affection for Dante is undeniable.

But the lively banter and good-natured ribbing are still overwhelming. The boisterous, casual camaraderie of Bea’s new family is utterly unlike the stilted formality of my life back in Elonia. By the time I give up on sampling the unfamiliar food on my plate—which is both strangely addictive and oddly artificial—I’m exhausted.

A glance around the circle shows that Dante, at least, seems equally weary. Bea simply looks amused by the whole thing. Yet Hecate, whose mood seems to have improved, and the twins appear to just be getting started.

“Since Dante dragged us off Crete,” Mal begins, setting what Bea referred to as “chopsticks” on his empty plate, “our entertainment options are somewhat limited. The way I see it, we can either head inside and play Monopoly or stay out here and start a game of spin the bottle.”

Hecate raises an eyebrow. “Those are seriously the only two options you can come up with?”

Mal shrugs. “Both stand about an equal chance of ending in a fistfight so I’ll let the ladies choose.”

I have no idea what either game involves. But given what I've seen of the twins so far, both sound like a recipe for disaster.

Sensing my ambivalence, Bea catches my eye.

When I nod, she kisses Dante on the cheek, then stands. "Sorry, but it will have to be *lady's* choice, Hecate's call. Alyssa and I have more girl talk to catch up on."

I'm about to stand and follow her when a tall, dark figure steps into the circle of firelight and clears his throat.

"Actually, I need to borrow Alyssa for a moment. We have some unfinished business." Bael catches my eye, expression unreadable.

Helpless, I glance over at Bea, who shoots me a look that seems to say, *Don't be an idiot.*

Mal squeezes my arm. "Don't worry. His bark is worse than his bite—and he's too uptight to bite you, anyway."

His brother's words cause Bael to glare even as a hot blush suffuses my skin that I can only hope no one notices in the dim light. Because I remember *exactly* how it feels to be bitten by Bael Styx...

Heart pounding, I stand, allowing Bael to lead me out of the circle of firelight and into the darkness.

BAEL

THE NIGHT IS STARLESS, the moon obscured by clouds. Were it not for the fairy lights and lanterns strung among the trees, darkness would devour the exterior of the estate. The farther we leave the fire pit behind, the more complete the darkness does become for *her*.

Alyssa.

The impossible woman-child who it's taking all of my self-control not to touch.

But between the goddess's curse and the unfortunate accident of my parentage, I receive no such respite from the burden of sight. No, I see every inch of her. And gods help me, but I want what I see, want her with an intensity that unsettles me.

The rose red of her dress accentuates her flawless skin, rendered white as snow by the ghostly lights we pass beneath. Such an utterly impractical dress given the coolness of the night, a dress I want to remove and reveal what's beneath.

Not that I need to undress her now to *know*. Because added to the affliction of my lust for blood, for her blood, are my body's newly acquired muscle memories of her curves, the taste of her, the scent of her, the sounds she makes when she's coming undone.

I was a fool to think that glutting myself on the blood of half a dozen thralls would do anything to dampen the temptation she presents. My fangs lengthened the moment she blushed at my brother's asinine attempt at reassurance.

Still, my earlier resolution to actually *talk* to her before succumbing to my baser urges remains. But when she stumbles on a small depression in the lawn, unseen by her weaker mortal eyes, I reflexively reach out to steady her, grasping the cool, bare skin of her arms. Beneath my hands, she recoils as the circuit between us comes alive.

Wincing, I release her.

Fucking hell. This is impossible. This desire. This magical bond. The fact that my magic somehow responds to her even more than my body does.

"Wait," she says, then stops and bends down, fussing with the strap on her stiletto sandals.

Her dress rides up, nearly revealing her delicious ass. It's all I can do not to run my hands along the creamy skin of her thighs, then higher still so that I might discover whether she's as wet as her scent suggests.

Straightening, she says, "Okay, that's better."

Her scent taunts me as we continue on in silence once more, her sandals now carried in one small, manicured hand. Wordlessly, I take the shoes from her, trying to ignore the small sigh of pleasure she makes as her toes sink into the lush lawn.

But I can't ignore anything about this woman. She's fast becoming an obsession, a drug I'm unsure I'll be able to live without.

Yet somehow, we make it to the entrance of the gardens without me claiming her on the lawn. As we step through a wooden door in the stone wall that separates the gardens from the rest of the estate, I pray to any gods who might be listening that this isn't a mistake.

Maybe I *should* simply scrap this part of my plan and make love to her before trying to explain the depth and breadth of the mess we're in. A mess for which neither of us is responsible.

No, the blame for that lies squarely with the two most impulsive and powerful beings who ever set foot in hell. The witch and my father.

Yet it falls to me to explain that to her, to explain how few options the two of us actually have. And to somehow do that without succumbing to the temptation to do something I won't be able to take back.

That is assuming I can convince her to hear me out. My plan felt foolproof when it occurred to me in the library. But when Alyssa comes to a stop outside the entrance to the hedge maze, I understand how difficult this might actually be.

"How did we end up here?" she asks, voice filled with a mistrust that's mirrored in her eyes as she finally recognizes our surroundings.

Unlike the south lawn, the gardens are well lit. Which means that her weaker mortal eyes are having no difficulties cataloging aesthetic details that surely appeal familiar.

Or at least they'd appear familiar to anyone who's managed to survive a stay at the Lotus with her wits fully intact, which Alyssa impossibly *did* do.

"Where are we, Bael?" she demands when I fail to answer her first question. "A few minutes ago we were in Cornwall..."

"And we still are," I reply, voice as neutral as I can manage when standing next to the woman whose very existence upends my entire world.

She shakes her head. "No, these are the gardens at the Lotus. The similarities are too striking for them to be merely laid out on the same plan. That statue, the way the roses climb that wall, and if we were to enter that hedge maze, we'd find the same pool at its center—wouldn't we?"

I set her shoes down next to a statue of Cerberus. Then bracing myself for the inevitable spark, I slide my arm through hers. "Let's venture to the maze's heart and find out," I say, unsure why I'm resisting

telling her the prosaic truth about the gardens when my whole plan hinges on me being honest with her.

Beside me she stiffens even as I pull her closer, leading her into the maze's dark depths. Once more, a circuit completes between us, but this time neither of us breaks the connection. Well, not the physical one at least.

I can feel the distance between us growing as my evasiveness causes her distrust to mount. But a perverse part of me welcomes it, welcomes her apprehension and fear.

Because, sure, she hesitated back at the fire pit, but only for the merest moment. She's allowed me to lead her deeper and deeper into the grounds of the estate, away from her friend, away from the witch and my brothers—in short, away from all those who stand any chance of being able to protect her from my baser urges.

Blindly, trustingly, she's followed me to an unknown destination, only balking when she thought she recognized her surroundings. Even now, she doesn't pull away, doesn't fight me, doesn't run.

Innocent child, gorgeous fool, following a monster into the dark. And why?

Because she feels the same connection you do? A connection you're doing your best to sever because you're a bloody masochist.

"The gardens at the Lotus are an illusion based on the originals located on this estate," I say, voice weary as I lead her down paths I know too well. "There's no trick here, love. I haven't taken you anywhere without your knowledge or consent. I just thought it would be fitting to have this conversation in a location similar to..."

When I don't finish, she completes my thought. "Where it all started. Where *we* started." Her body relaxes, just the tiniest bit. "I didn't realize you were sentimental, Bael Styx."

I shake my head. "I'm not."

"Yeah, right..." she says, then falls silent.

Heart pounding, I lead her through the maze's twists and turns. My feet know the way, which is damn useful since if I had to consciously remember the path right now, we'd wander lost for days, if not years.

Because *this* isn't supposed to happen, this affinity between the magic of two separate beings. Yet each time I touch her, the connection between us grows stronger, requiring less and less to set it off.

What if Hades is right?

But that's a question I'm unsure I want answered. Because if the old man *is* right, then she's the only woman who can save me, the only being in all of eternity who can end this curse. A curse I'd despaired of escaping centuries ago.

A curse I vowed never to break—at least not on Aphrodite's terms.

Because I don't want to become my father, don't want to bind an innocent to me for all of eternity just to satisfy my own selfish needs. Or at least I hadn't... the more time I spend with Alyssa, the less certain I become about anything.

I hate uncertainty, hate leaving anything to chance. Yet when we reach the maze's center, I toss a quarter from one of the Lotus's slot machines into the pool, praying that I won't fuck this up.

Alyssa slips her arm out of mine and sits on the low stone wall surrounding the pool. As I approach, she turns her back to me, swinging her legs over the wall and submerging her feet in the pool's dark waters.

Gods, even her legs are gorgeous. Is there any part of this woman that I don't want to touch, don't want to claim as mine?

Silent, I sit beside her, my back to the water. Looking away from the temptation of her, I stare at the dark hedges surrounding us, hemming us in. Suddenly, the speech I mentally rehearsed feels pointless. Bringing her here was pointless, thinking we could somehow reason our way out of this trap... who did I think I was kidding?

Her voice is soft in the darkness. "Why are we here, Bael?"

Sighing, I turn and face her, face the confusion in her innocent eyes.

"So I can apologize."

"For what?"

I shrug, hating how helpless I feel beneath her gaze, which is perceptive beyond her years, belying the innocence of her questions. "For the sins of my father? For being fucking helpless to stop—"

I can't say it, but still she presses. "Helpless to stop what?"

"This," I say, pulling her into my arms and claiming her mouth in a bruising kiss.

I wish she would fight me, pull away, have the goddamn sense to run from this stupidly secluded spot, but instead her lips part beneath mine and she kisses me back. She kisses me back while pressing her breasts against me, wrapping her slender arms around my neck.

But one of us *does* have to fight this. And of the two of us, I'm the elder, the one who should know better, the one who should have the strength to not succumb to the temptation of a connection that neither of us can control.

And so somehow, I end the kiss. But I find that I can't bring myself to end this embrace completely, can't pull away. Pressing my forehead against hers, I force myself to voice my deepest shame, the reason that she and I are here in this garden—the reason my father felt entitled to upend her life.

Because before I can carry out the rest of my plan, she needs to understand.

"I'm cursed."

"I know," she replies, too quickly, voice too breathless, too trusting, too calm.

Something in me snaps then, and I push her away.

“No, you *don’t* know!” I say, feeling like a petulant child but unable to keep my frustration at bay.

She shakes her head. “But I do, Bea told me all about it.”

And now it’s my turn to shake my head in refusal. “Not the worst of it,” I say in a voice nearly too low for her to hear. “She’s too besotted with my brother to comprehend the full horror. They may have gotten their fairy tale ending, but the curse isn’t as simple as that. It’s not simple at all.”

For a moment she doesn’t reply, and when she does, the frown on her face is reflected in her voice. “I never said I thought it was simple.”

“But your friend does, doesn’t she?”

At this, Alyssa nods.

“So see? Then you don’t know.”

“Well then, maybe it’s time you told me.”

ALYSSA

THE DISTANCE between us feels impossible to bridge. And yet there's a small, stupid part of me that's foolish enough to hope that we *will* bridge it. Because the way Bael kissed me just now...

Well, it makes me wonder whether Dante and Bea are right.

Turning away from him, I stare into the pool's dark depths. My toes look ghostly beneath the water.

I'm unsure what season it currently is in this world, but here in the maze, away from the fire pit, it's definitely cold. I shiver.

Beside me, Bael wordlessly drapes his suit jacket over my shoulders.

I look up at him. "Thank you."

"Gods, you have so much in common with him," he says, catching me off guard.

"With who?"

"Adonis."

I frown. "How so?"

"You majored in Greek mythology. Isn't it obvious?" he asks. "Like you, love, Adonis was mortal. And also like you, he was possessed of a beauty rare among mortals. My father told me about your mirror daemon's claim, that you're the fairest in the land. Similar sentiments were declared about him."

"Well, yes, I'm familiar with the myth. But I don't see how us both being attractive mortals is that large of a commonality."

He shakes his head. "To understand that, you need to first understand his fate..."

Relieved that Bael is finally opening up, I remain silent as he summarizes the part of the tale I already know. Adonis was a mortal youth, favored not by one goddess, but two. Aphrodite and Persephone. It was the latter, however, who undertook the work of raising the child. The only part of the story new to me is the fact that Persephone already had sons of her own—Bael and his brothers.

I pull his jacket more tightly around me. The familiar tale takes on a new poignancy as the words fall from Bael's lips. His voice is hypnotic in the darkness, forcing me to feel the pain of events that until now felt like mere fiction.

"The true tragedy began when Adonis came of age. When Aphrodite returned for him, she found that my mother didn't want to give him back. They were at an impasse so my uncle intervened."

He pauses, presumably to give me the chance to acknowledge that I already know what happened next. Because of course, Zeus's intervention is recorded in the myths, but for some reason I find I want to hear it firsthand from the man who just kissed me, the man I desperately want to kiss again, to do more than kiss...

So I wait.

"All-powerful gods like my uncle have a tendency to wield a brand of justice that can be cruel in its rationality." Bael sighs. "Zeus's solution took no real consideration for the desires of mortal hearts—or immortal ones, for that matter. He decreed that Adonis would spend a third of his time with my mother, a third with Aphrodite, and the remainder with the goddess of his choice.

"I'm unsure I can really blame him for choosing the goddess of love, the goddess who loved him as a man rather than as the boy he no longer was. And yet love didn't save him in the end. I'm unsure whether it ever can—save any of us."

This last observation seems awfully fatalistic given that Bea just saved her husband with true love's kiss, but all I say is, "How did he die?"

To my frustration, but not my surprise, Bael shakes his head. "I know no more about the actual circumstances of Adonis's death. Only what's been recorded in the competing myths. There were no witnesses, or at least none who came forward. And this is where the myth and the reality diverge..."

"What happened next?" I ask, even though I suspect I know where this is going.

"When no culprit was found, Aphrodite decided to play judge and jury herself. She suspected my mother of having had an affair with Adonis during the four months each year he'd spent with her. In her mind, the temptation of Adonis was one no woman, mortal or goddess, could resist—marriage vows be damned. Yet my father's possessive jealousy concerning my mother was even then well-known, so it wasn't a huge leap for Aphrodite to decide that Hades had caught the forbidden lovers together and exacted his revenge."

"Wait. How exactly did the murderer's identity remain a secret when all anyone had to do was ask his shade?" I demand. "If your father was innocent, wouldn't it have been simple enough for him to interrogate the shade and clear his name?"

"You would have thought so, but no. Knowing well Aphrodite's temper, Adonis refused to name his assassin—assuming that if he declined to identify the culprit, she would be forced to let the matter die along with him. His gentleness, his belief in the ultimate good of the goddess he loved, was his tragic flaw—a flaw I've paid for."

A sick feeling twists in my gut. "She cursed you because of your parents' crimes—or alleged crimes, I guess."

He nods. “To pay for the blood of her beloved mortal being spilled, she cursed me and my brothers to crave mortal blood. To atone for the loss of the children of Adonis that she would now never bear, she declared that the sons of hell would impregnate no women, neither mortal nor divine. And to make up for all the sunlit days Adonis had lost, we too would be barred from ever again walking beneath the sun.”

We sit in silence as he lets the import of that sink in. For several long moments, the horror of it renders me unable to formulate a reply. It’s a darker myth than the ones recorded by mortal scribes. Because in those myths...

“But weren’t Aphrodite and Adonis reunited above ground half the year? Didn’t Zeus at least allow them that much?” I ask, not wanting to believe that the actual events were so unbelievably tragic.

He shakes his head. “Perhaps if my uncle had shown that small mercy, Aphrodite’s rage might have been soothed. But he’d already interfered in the workings of his brother’s domain once by allowing my mother to leave for half of each year. That betrayal, at least as my father saw it, strained their relationship nearly to the breaking point. Zeus vowed to never again interfere in the workings of hell. And so Adonis remained dead.”

Not knowing what else to say, I murmur, “I’m sorry.”

“No, Alyssa, *I’m* sorry,” he says, voice anguished. “Because Adonis dying isn’t the truly fucked up part. Neither is me being cursed, not really. Don’t you understand? Aphrodite’s actual cruelty is that the curse can be *broken*.”

It’s impossible to make out his expression in the darkness. But even if I hadn’t heard it in his voice, his pain is a palpable presence between us, a chasm I’m unsure how to cross.

Yet I’m realizing that I *want* to cross it. We barely know each other, yet I hate the thought of him hurting.

On impulse, I reach out to him in the darkness, clasping his hand in my own. The spark when we touch still unnerves me, yet I’m relieved when he doesn’t pull away.

“I’m trying to understand,” I say slowly, “but I’m afraid I don’t. Bea seemed to think it was a good thing that the curse could be broken. And after watching her and Dante together, I’m not sure I disagree.”

He squeezes my hand. “While I am happy for my brother, love, the problem with happy endings is that they tend to gloss over all the damage and pain that precede them. Did Bea share with you any of my brother’s history *prior* to meeting her?”

“Some,” I say, trying to keep the uneasiness out of my voice. “And he told me a bit more. I know that she isn’t his first wife, that he tried the ritual before, and that it failed.”

“Exactly,” Bael replies, voice bitter. “My brother is a hopeless romantic, in love with falling in love.”

Once more, I consider the things Dante confided in me earlier. “His story is tragic, but I’m starting to see why he risked it, maybe even why his wives did too. Without the ritual, he’d have had to

eventually watch them die anyway. And if they loved him, well... maybe sometimes love isn't a binary thing? Sure, none of them ended up being 'the one,' but I can see why they hoped they were, why they'd risk death."

Bael laughs, but there's no mirth in it. "Is that what you think? That they were merely risking death? Clearly, my brother didn't tell you the whole story."

For the first time since entering the garden with Bael, I'm suddenly afraid. No, not of him, but of what he's going to say next. Suddenly, I don't want him to continue. But of course, he does.

"While I'm unsure I share your views on death being preferable to a broken heart, death wasn't the penalty they paid for guessing wrong. With each wrong guess, the object of my brother's affections transformed into a horrific monster—monsters that we bound in Tartarus, monsters who have no hope of reincarnating because their souls were destroyed by the ritual's magic."

At this statement, the question of knowing *how* to tell the difference between biology and fated love takes on a new urgency. Yet I feel even farther from being able to answer it than I was before.

"Everyone seems to think that you and I..." My face heats. "Or at least Hecate and Bea have said that I'm..."

"That you're the woman who can break my curse."

"Yeah, that..." I say, hating how lame the two words sound, but not knowing what else to say when every cell in my body wants me to climb into Bael's lap and beg him to bite me despite my mind screaming *run*.

I don't run, but I do release his hand, needing to put some kind of distance between us, to break whatever this strange connection is so that I can think straight. Because as powerful as the pull between us is, I don't want to become a monster either...

Bael stares down at his empty hands. "While I can't deny that I'm developing feelings... No, not feelings." He looks up at me and holds my gaze. "Fucking hell, Alyssa, I feel a pull toward you that verges on addiction. But there's love and then there's the fated-in-the-stars, nearly impossible to find love that the curse demands. And how the hell are we supposed to know which is which?" he asks, echoing my own thoughts.

"Maybe we don't need to," I say. "Or not right away, at least? Given how quickly they eloped, I'm guessing Dante is nearly as impulsive as Bea. Maybe he wouldn't have made so many mistakes if he'd simply waited."

Bael sighs. "You're wise beyond your years, love. Unfortunately, the amount of time we have to figure it out is likely in short supply."

"I don't understand."

"Hecate and Bea aren't the only ones convinced that you're my fated mate. My father has decided that you are as well. And my brother's poor impulse control? Well, let's just say that in his case, the apple doesn't fall far from the tree."

“So what are you saying? That Hades has decreed that we have to get married and perform the ritual?”

“My father isn’t terribly concerned with the formalities, but yes, he wants me to perform the ritual with you. And...” He hesitates.

Suddenly, the water covering my feet and lower legs feels unbearably cold. Intolerable. Twisting around, I swing my feet over the stone ledge. Unfortunately, the movement causes his jacket to slip off my shoulders, falling into the pool. The night air is icy against my wet legs and raises the gooseflesh on my arms. I shiver.

And then, somehow, my back is pressed against Bael’s, his arms wrapped around me. A part of me wants to fight the embrace, wants to fight *him*. But another part of me craves this, his warmth, his solid presence anchoring me on the stone ledge.

“And *what*, Bael?” I ask, certain that whatever he’s about to tell me is going to be something else that I won’t like.

He buries his face in my hair before replying, nearly too low for me to hear, “And I agreed to try to break the curse with you, agreed to perform the fucking ritual.”

The guilt lacing his voice makes it clear that there’s more he’s not saying, but suddenly I find that I don’t want to know, don’t want to discover any more new information that will somehow make this situation even worse. Because already, it’s pretty damn bad.

“It didn’t cross your mind to find out whether *I* agree?” I ask, voice sharp. “That I might not be willing to risk my *immortal soul* on the off chance that doing so will break your curse? Did you ever think of that?”

“Of course I did! But you have to understand that I had no choice. He left me no choice. I had to drink to it, had to accept his deal.”

Despite the warmth of Bael’s embrace, a chill passes over me. Because I’ve studied enough myths to know that there’s a difference between merely “agreeing” to do something the lord of the underworld wants and accepting one of his deals. And sealing it with alcohol, no less.

“You’ve been an adult for several thousand years,” I say, struggling to keep the tears out of my voice. “Your father may be Hades, but you didn’t *have* to agree to any deal. You chose to.”

“No, Alyssa. I really *didn’t* have a choice.” His arms tighten around me as if he senses my desire to run. “But you have to understand how my father is, how he can twist words and logic until he has you backed into a corner with no choice but to agree to his demands.”

Again, I have the sense that Bael is holding something back. But in a moment of chilling clarity, I realize it doesn’t matter *why* he agreed to perform the ritual. Because the fact of the matter is that he did. He made a deal with the devil, and in doing so, sealed my fate.

“So this is where you bite me, I guess,” I say, heart pounding.

“No, it is absolutely *not* where I bite you, Alyssa.”

“But you said—”

“I said that I agreed to perform the ritual, but not when. My father is an impatient man. But while we likely don’t have a lot of time, we do have some.”

“But why delay?” I twist around in his arms so that I’m facing him. “If the choice is between performing the ritual and my death, what point is there in not just getting it over with?”

“As you pointed out, love, I’ve been my own man for several thousand years now. And there’s no way in hell that I’m forcing any woman to spend eternity with me, deal with my father or not. He may be a manipulative tyrant, but I do still have free will. And we *do* still have time.”

“Time for what, though?” I ask, painfully aware of how close our lips are, how easy it would be to kiss him—or for him to bite me—and how badly I want to do just that.

“Time to figure out whether the bastard is right,” he says, brushing his lips against mine. But then instead of kissing me, he stands, pulling me to my feet. “But as we don’t have a lot of it, I suggest that we don’t do it here, not with how many people are staying in this house.”

I frown. “You want to return to the Lotus?”

He shakes his head. “No, I have somewhere nearer in mind. Somewhere where we can explore whatever this is between us without being interrupted.”

ALYSSA

ARM AROUND MY WAIST, Bael leads me into the cave. As cold as the beach was, the temperature inside the cavern is several degrees cooler, making me glad that he insisted on returning to the house first so that I could change into more comfortable clothes.

Not wanting to waste time searching through my suitcase, I simply put the outfit Hecate conjured back on. And as he leads me now across the uneven cave floor, I find myself unexpectedly glad for the sensible boots. Of course the terrain would be less difficult to navigate and I might not have to rely on Bael so much if I could actually *see*, not that I'm really complaining about the strong arm wrapped around me, nor do I really mind the way he has me pressed against his side...

Because I'm finding that I'm fast becoming addicted to touching Bael Styx. It's a strange feeling, needing to touch someone so badly who I didn't even know until a few days ago. Although when Dante explained the magical bond between him and Bea, he described a similar feeling—an irrepressible *need* to be closer that went beyond sexual desire.

Not that I'm *not* tempted by the thought of having sex with Bael, of going farther than we did last night... But the intensity of the pull I feel toward him really does feel like more than mere lust. It's more like I've stumbled upon another part of me that I hadn't known was lost.

“Ah, here we are,” Bael says, a note of satisfaction in his voice. Then he recites a few words of Greek, and the next moment the cave is suddenly filled with dazzling light as dozens of torches fitted into recesses in the walls flare to life.

Although now that I can actually see my surroundings, I realize that we're not in a cave at all but a tunnel. And not just any tunnel but...

“You own a gem mine?” I ask, taking in the thousands of precious gems embedded in the tunnel walls.

“Technically, the mine belongs to my father,” he says. “Don't tell me that you've forgotten all of your studies already, love.”

Right. Because Hades's other name is Pluto, and he's the god not just of the underworld but of all the wealth hidden beneath the Earth's surface.

“Of course not,” I reply, hating how foolish I feel. “But you know, it's kind of hard to think straight with your hand around my waist.”

“Better?” he asks, releasing my waist and instead taking my hand.

“Barely,” I murmur as a surge of magic travels between our joined hands, “but I suppose it will have to do.”

“I fear you’re right.” He squeezes my hand. “Because I’m not at all ready to let you go.”

His words send a thrill through me because I find that I’m not ready for him to let me go either. Because as insane as it is, I simply feel *better* when Bael and I are touching, skin to skin.

We continue on in silence for a few moments, the ground sloping slightly downward as we descend deeper into the mine. Gradually, however, I become aware of a clangling sound up ahead.

I shoot Bael a quizzical look, but all he says is, “Patience, love. You’ll see.”

A short while later, the tunnel curves, and then we round a bend and I see them several yards ahead—the strange, little men I spotted earlier today on the beach. Little men who Hecate referred to as dwarfs, as in the creatures I thought only existed in fairy tales.

I shake my head. “Oh my god, you actually have a gem mine staffed by fairy tale dwarfs?” I ask, unable to keep the incredulity out of my voice.

Bael shrugs. “Well, technically they’re demons, not regular dwarfs, but basically... yeah.”

I find myself reluctant to walk past them. Seeming to sense my hesitancy, Bael pauses, and we stand in silence as we watch the dwarfs work. For creatures so small, they swing their pickaxes with surprising strength.

Bael gestures toward a cart already laden with gemstones that the dwarfs appear determined to fill to overflowing. “Would you like one? Or fifty? Take as many as you want,” he offers. “Dad won’t miss them.”

When I shake my head, he raises an eyebrow in surprise.

I shrug. “So this is gonna sound stupid, but this actually isn’t as impressive to me as the fact that you threw an *actual coin* into a fountain—twice now.”

At this, he smiles. “I forget sometimes how strange your world is. To think that objects as commonplace as coins are rarer than gemstones. But if a tuppence is all it takes to impress you...”

With his free hand, he reaches behind my ear, then hands me a two-pence piece. Unable to help it, I giggle as I take it from him and slip it into the pocket of my jeans.

Something about my laughter, however, draws the dwarfs’ attention. The pickaxes fall silent, and I become aware of seven pairs of eyes observing me. My laughter dries up then under the scrutiny. It isn’t that the dwarfs’ regard is hostile, but it’s not quite friendly either. There’s a cold calculation to it that causes me to shiver.

Bael squeezes my hand reassuringly. “Ignore them. They’re grumpy little men, resentful that they’ve been assigned to mine duty at all.”

“So this is a punishment, then?” I ask as we begin walking again, trying to ignore the dwarfs watching me from both sides of the tunnel.

“Not exactly,” he says slowly. “It’s complicated, but I guess you could say that they’ve proven themselves to be too untrustworthy to remain in Hades, at least for the time being.”

I’m about to ask a follow-up question when I overhear one of the dwarfs mumbling, “I’m telling you. It *is* Queen Persephone.”

“And I’m telling you that you’re a nincompoop,” a gravelly voice replies. “Use your brains if you have any. Lord Bael hasn’t held her hand like that since he was a lad.”

Beside me, Bael stiffens and picks up his pace. I allow him to drag me along for about a hundred yards, deciding that it’s better to wait until the dwarfs are out of earshot to speak.

But once they are, I can’t help but ask the obvious question. “What were they talking about back there?”

Part of me expects him to be as evasive as Hecate was earlier, but to my surprise, he says, “Wasn’t it obvious? They thought you were my mother.”

“Umm, why? Don’t they know what your mom looks like? Where *is* she, by the way? Is it currently the half of the year that she has to spend in the underworld?”

“My mother died some years ago,” he replies, voice tight.

Oh, shit. I feel terrible, but I genuinely had no idea. None of the myths...

“Okay, so feel free not to answer if this is too difficult of a subject, but I didn’t think that gods and goddesses could die.”

“They can’t.”

“But then how—”

Bael stops walking and turns to face me. “It’s not a pleasant story, love. But I suppose if we’re seriously considering doing this, it’s one you should know.”

Unsure how to reply, I simply wait for him to continue. After a moment, he sighs, then begins walking again, albeit at a slower pace.

Finally, he says, “You know the story of how my parents met, right? My father abducting her, my grandmother throwing a fit, Zeus intervening and decreeing that she had to spend half the year in the underworld?”

I nod. “Yeah, of course.”

“Well, the part that didn’t make it into the myths is that Zeus fucked up. When he issued his judgment, he only decreed that Persephone, *the goddess of spring*, had to spend six months of the year in Hades.”

He falls silent, giving me a moment to consider this new information.

“Your mother found a way to no longer be the goddess of spring? That doesn’t seem like it should be possible...”

“It shouldn’t,” he agrees. “But when your best friend is an exceedingly powerful witch... Well, let’s just say that the usual rules don’t apply.”

And suddenly another piece of the puzzle falls into place. “Hecate.”

Bael nods. “Seeing my mother’s increasing unhappiness, she brewed a potion that allowed her to renounce her own blood, reject her own birthright.”

“She became mortal.”

“Correct. Although that still wasn’t enough for her to escape my father entirely. Because while mortal she might be, she was still *Persephone*—wife of Hades. But mortal souls only retain a single identity for the span of one lifetime. Once they die, their souls become shades and reside in Hades until they’re reborn. A process my mother was apparently most anxious to complete.”

Suddenly understanding where this is going, I feel sick. “She killed herself.”

Once again, he nods. “Not that death freed her immediately, because as a shade she became fully confined to my father’s domain—at least until she was reborn the first time. Then the veil came down, and her soul was forever lost to him.”

“And you,” I add, regretting the words the moment I say them.

“Yes,” he agrees. “And me.”

“We have that in common, you know,” I say. “My mother died when I was a little girl. I miss her every day.”

“I can’t say that’s a commonality I’m glad we share. It must have been difficult losing her as a child. I was at least an adult when my mother...”

He doesn’t finish the sentence, but he doesn’t need to. Because the difference between us is that his mother didn’t just die, she *left*. She chose suicide over her sons.

Desperate to change the subject, at least slightly, I say, “You know, I’d never have ended up at the Lotus if my mom hadn’t died. When I thought I’d been rejected, well, I kind of ran away from home—to escape my stepmother. I claimed it was just a vacation, but there was a part of me that didn’t want to go back.”

Bael shakes his head. “You do realize that coming to the Lotus wasn’t actually your choice? Hecate manipulated you into thinking it was, the same way she manipulated your government’s algorithm into thinking you were rejected. Gods tend to do that. It’s one of our worst traits.”

“You haven’t,” I say, voice quiet.

“Haven’t I?” he asks. “Then tell me, why are you here with me now?”

“Because it’s what I want. Because you’re what I want.”

He sighs. "More the fool you, but we've reached our destination."

His statement causes me to shift my focus from him and actually take in our surroundings. A few feet ahead of us, the tunnel dead-ends. Fitted into the rock wall is a rough-hewn wooden door.

"Where does it lead?" I ask as we draw nearer.

"Patience, love. You'll see soon enough."

ALYSSA

THE COTTAGE IS CUTER than anything I ever imagined. But I struggle to take in all the details as Bael gives me a tour. Because I meant what I said in the tunnel. I want Bael, want him with all my heart.

The desire to be closer to him is overwhelming, but I keep my voice casual as I ask, “So this belonged to your mother? Does that mean that it’s just been sitting out here unused?”

“For the most part,” he agrees. “But as the dwarfs insist on maintaining it, due to their conviction that she’ll return one day, I sometimes come out here when I want to be by myself. It offers greater solitude than any of my other residences.”

Pointing to the one room he hasn’t shown me, I ask, “What’s in there?”

He gives me an inscrutable look, then says, “The bedroom.”

“Show me.”

“Alyssa...”

“There’s no use denying it,” I argue. “You know we need to do this. Don’t try to tell me that you don’t feel this too.”

For a moment it seems as if he’ll argue, but he only gives me another inscrutable look and says, “Gods, I hope we don’t regret this.”

We barely make it into the bedroom before he’s kissing me, his hands exploring my body, then traveling lower, undoing my jeans. I moan as he slides a hand into my damp panties, his finger circling my clit.

Unable to stand the teasing, I break the kiss. “Please, Bael, I can’t take this anymore. I need you inside me.”

Again, I half expect him to argue, but to my relief he merely murmurs the same spell he used last night before pulling me into his arms, all barriers between us gone, skin touching skin as his lips claim mine in another bruising kiss. We tumble down onto the bed, tongues warring. If kissing him before felt like a slow descent into desire, this is like being pushed over a ledge.

As his fingers tangle in my hair, I'm awash in sensations. The cool slide of the sheets beneath me. The hot, hard heat of his body pressing down on mine. It's too much, and yet it's nowhere near enough.

Turning my head away from his demanding mouth, I struggle to catch my breath even as I manage to gasp out, "Please."

Thankfully, he doesn't make me elaborate, doesn't make me beg. He merely reaches down and slides a finger into my aching wetness.

"Gods," he murmurs against my ear. "How is it that you can be so wet already?"

"Please," I whimper. "I need you."

I don't have to tell him again. He withdraws his finger from my wet warmth, and then the next moment, I feel his cock pressing against me, demanding entrance.

His next words I feel as much as hear, hot against my ear as the head of his cock breaches me. "Gods, Alyssa, you're even more perfect than I imagined. I... gods help me, but I love you."

"I love you too," I gasp, crying out as he pushes deeper into me. He's so large that it's almost too much, but I find that I don't want him to stop.

Because I do—I love him. And maybe this is all too soon, but it feels absolutely right.

"The initial pain is unavoidable, but I promise you will feel pleasure before we're done."

And it does hurt. I feel every excruciating, glorious inch as Bael sheathes himself deep inside me. Once he's all the way in, he stops, our bodies finally fully joined.

"Breathe with me, love. In and out. That's it."

And then he begins to move inside me, our breaths, heartbeats, and desire as one. And with each thrust, the pain recedes, replaced by a pleasure so intense that I'm unsure whether I'll survive it.

He plunges deep into me, again and again, and I arch against him, meeting each thrust, hungry for more as he stokes a fire between us that threatens to burn out of control.

I wrap my legs around his hips, urging him forward, needing to feel him deeper inside me. Because I am his, utterly. My virginity is his, as is my heart, my life, my everything. After tonight, I know it will be impossible for me to belong to any other man.

Because I've never known anything like the ecstasy of this moment. The all-consuming connection that is everything—or almost.

I tilt my head back, baring my neck to him. "Bael, please," I beg, grabbing his head and guiding his mouth to my neck.

And then, when his fangs sink into my neck, it *is* everything. It's the impossible bond that I felt last night when he bit me, but a thousand times more intense because it's combined with the nearly overwhelming sensation of his body deep within mine.

A feeling too intense to name builds inside me, a feeling deeper, more powerful, more *right* than anything I've ever known. Bael's thrusts become at once more impassioned and erratic as the bond between us builds.

And then I'm falling over a precipice, again and again and again. But even as I fall, crying out, I'm held safe in Bael's arms—his hot release flooding me even as my blood fills his mouth.

BAEL

GODS, what have I done?

I stare down at Alyssa's sleeping form as the dawn light bathes her skin in its soft glow. But what I can't look away from is the ugly purple bruise that mars the snow-white skin of her neck. A bruise I put there.

What the fuck was I thinking? But I know the answer. I wasn't thinking at all.

In my head, the plan made sense. Apologize, explain the situation to her, then convince her to spend some time alone together to explore the undeniable pull between us. Because what better way to get to know her, to have a chance to actually *talk* than on the long walk to the cottage?

Oh, I'm not a saint. I knew that there was a good chance that if I took her here, we'd have sex. But I convinced myself that would only happen after we discussed things, after we were certain that we wanted to do this, after *I* was certain—

Certain that I loved her, certain that she was my fated mate.

But we were supposed to have a conversation first, not fall into bed like a pair of horny teenagers. When I told her how I felt, it was supposed to be a romantic moment that she'd remember for the rest of her life—not an impulsive declaration made when I was balls deep in her. And that bruise... that definitely wasn't supposed to happen, and it can't happen again. The only question is—how do I tell her that?

I was a fool to think we could thread the needle like that. It was sheer hubris on my part to think that I could let myself touch her, and then not...

Because I thought once I knew whether I loved her, the decision to go ahead with the ritual would be simple. But it isn't simple at all... Because if anything, realizing how I feel about her makes me see that I absolutely *cannot* take that kind of risk with her life, with her soul.

Yet how do I make her understand that she's the only woman I've ever wanted, quite possibly the only woman I've ever loved, and that despite that, what happened last night can *never* happen again? No, not despite that. Because of it.

And then she opens her eyes, and I understand that the moment I'm dreading is fast approaching and that there's nothing I can do to put it off.

In fact, I'm not even given a moment's reprieve because of course the first words out of her mouth are

“I love you.” She smiles up at me, and the joy and hope in her eyes cut me like a knife.

“I know,” I say, hating how cold the two words sound, hating my reluctance to repeat the three words I said last night, even though I do. I love her too.

May the gods help me, but when it comes to her, I've broken every single one of my own rules. And as a shadow passes over her face and she stiffens beside me, I suddenly understand the cost I'll pay for that lapse in judgment.

Heart pounding, I wait for her to speak, but she only stares up at me with unfathomably sad eyes. When several moments more pass and she still doesn't say anything, I force myself to continue.

“I know you love me, and I—” My voice breaks. “I love you too. But we can never do that again.”

She sits up. “I don't follow.”

“What part is so difficult to understand? It's not you. It's me. I'm a monster. I can't trust myself night after night with your safety. Last night, I nearly did something unforgivable. You're better off returning to your own world, love. I can't be the man you need me to be.”

Pushing the covers off, she gets out of the bed and stands. I can see the tears in her eyes—tears that *I* put there—but she doesn't cry. Not yet. But I know that she will before this nightmare ends. Fuck.

Wildly, she scans the room, then turns toward me and glares. “I need my clothes.”

“Alyssa, calm down. We can discuss—”

“Where are my fucking clothes, Bael?”

With reluctance, I snap my fingers, conjuring the outfit she was wearing the night before. Not speaking, refusing to look me in the eye, she starts to dress, starting with her jeans.

“I'm sorry I didn't mean—”

“Yeah, apparently you didn't mean anything. That's the problem,” she says, voice raw, pulling her shirt over her head. “You didn't mean a goddamn word you said last night.”

“Alyssa, wait—” I begin, heart racing. Because she can't leave. Not like this, not before I've figured out how to keep my father away from her.

She shakes her head and opens the bedroom door. Jumping out of bed, I follow after her, not bothering to dress. Just as she reaches the cottage's front door, I grab her arm, but she angrily pulls away.

“Listen to me!” I roar, panicking because everything is fucking falling apart. “It *isn't* that I don't love you, Alyssa.”

Tears streaming down her face now, she turns and faces me, one hand on the doorknob. “Then what is it, Bael?”

“You’re too precious to risk,” I reply, voice soft, hoping against hope that she’ll somehow understand. But she merely shakes her head, then pushing the door open, steps out into the sun, so eager to get away from me that her feet are still bare, fleeing where I can’t follow.

ALYSSA

TEARS BLUR my vision as I tear down the twisting trail, needing to put as much distance between me and the cottage, between me and Bael, as I can. I was a fool to think he could really love me—or that true love even existed. There's a *reason* that matches are assigned and not left to chance.

Only one path led away from the clearing the cottage sat in, and I hope against hope that it actually leads back to the main house. But as I follow it deeper into the woods, my sense of misgiving grows.

Because sooner than I expect, the amount of sunlight filtering in through the branches overhead lessens. Realizing I'm now deep within the forest, I slow my pace, hoping I haven't made a mistake by venturing out here alone. Because unlike in Elonia, there are still animals in this world. Birds chirp overhead and every so often small, furry creatures dart across the path. I really hope that all the animals I encounter are small...

The path seems to go on forever, although the packed dirt beneath my bare feet is at least smooth, nary a stray pebble or twig marring its surface, which when you think of it, is strange in and of itself. But everything about this world is strange, foreign. I don't belong here.

But do I belong anywhere? The question seems to follow me as I continue along the path. The physical direction I need to travel is obvious enough, yet still, I feel terribly lost.

For a few scant hours, I thought I belonged with Bael. But now I know how deluded that thought was.

The algorithm promises a perfect match. It guarantees compatibility in all ways. Education, interests, genetics, and even that most ephemeral domain of all—emotions. So is it the algorithm that's broken or me?

Because while Alex is obviously my perfect match, he left me cold. We spent the entire day in each other's company, but never once did I feel a fraction as alive as I've felt when I'm with Bael.

Not that Alex and I did more than hold hands. But still... sometimes you just know, don't you? But the problem is that I *don't* know. The only thing I know is that Bael makes me feel both better and worse than anyone ever has in my entire life.

He says he loves me—but not like *that*, not enough to take a chance, a leap of faith. He's unwilling to take the risk with me that Dante took with Bea.

And maybe he's right, maybe it's my friend and his brother who are the real fools. Sure, the risk they took paid off, but it *was* a risk. A risk I thought I wanted to take after last night, and yet clearly that would have been a mistake.

Because Bael doesn't love me, not the way Dante loves Bea. The ritual would have failed, and I'm not sure what the hell I was thinking to even want to try when I have a perfectly fine life waiting for me back in my own world. A world ruled by order, predictability, simplicity.

Because the logic behind allowing the algorithm to assign mates *is* simple. Why leave to chance what can be assured through science? Why risk everything for something as transient and fragile as love? Why let yourself care so desperately, so foolishly, for someone you're bound to one day lose?

Up ahead, the trees begin to thin, and I quicken my pace, eager to reach the house. Maybe if I'm lucky, I can persuade Hecate to return me to the Lotus before Bael returns and avoid a repeat of the painful scene I just fled.

Yet when the path ends, the house is nowhere in sight, nor is the ocean. No, I'm standing at the entrance of a secret garden, hidden away in the forest's heart.

Feeling as if I've stepped into a storybook, I explore the garden. It's even more entrancing than the gardens at the house—or at the Lotus, for that matter. Because unlike Bael's other gardens, this one is utterly wild and free. If not for the careful arrangements of colors, I'd have assumed that the plants growing here naturally occurred.

But no, it's clear that someone selected these plants and arranged them with great care. And I'm pretty sure that someone wasn't Bael because this garden is the antithesis of his quiet, deliberate control.

The deeper I venture into the garden, the stranger and less like something Bael would design it seems. But the strangest thing of all is a tall mirror propped beneath a shady tree.

A stone bench stands before the mirror, and I step around it, running my hand around the mirror's mahogany frame, not quite believing that the incongruous object is real.

While the smooth, polished wood beneath my hand feels genuine enough, I'm beginning to realize that when it comes to dealing with Bael Styx, I have no idea what's real and what's an illusion. And that's the problem.

I have no idea.

I can't even decide if the things I feel when I'm around him are real. But if I don't know, then who does?

Sinking down onto the stone bench, I gaze at my reflection. But something is wrong with the mirror. Because while the glass is flawless, I don't recognize the face staring back at me. Or maybe I don't want to recognize it.

Or rather, the truth is that the girl in the mirror frightens me. She's beautiful, yes, but there's a hungry, lost look in her eyes. The eyes of a caged animal stare back at me, as if she's as trapped as I feel.

I love you.

I know.

That horrible last conversation with Bael echoes in my mind as I stare at my swollen and red-rimmed eyes in the mirror. I hate that my own face suddenly reminds me of my stepmother rather than my own mom.

I look away, and that's when my gaze lands on a small rectangular object propped against the mirror's base. My Lethe. How on Earth did it find its way out here?

I don't know, but now that it's here, the temptation to run the mirror app is nearly overwhelming. I may not be able to speak with her, but seeing her again will still be a comfort. Hoping Bea is wrong about the Lethes not working at all in this realm, I recite the familiar command phrase.

Mirror, mirror, whose sight sets you apart,

Who loves me with all their heart?

But Bea was right. Nothing happens. Lethes simply don't work here. As I set the Lethe back where I found it, a wave of despair washes over me.

I've never felt so lost, so friendless. Bea may claim that we're still best friends, but it's clear that her loyalties lie with Dante now and no one else.

No, I'm alone. Alone and trapped on the estate of a man who just rejected me, and I can't even catch a glimpse of my mother for comfort.

“Bold choice, choosing that particular command phrase. It's always a bit of a gamble, discussing matters as delicate as love with a daemon. You might receive an answer you don't like.”

Heart pounding, I look into the mirror, hoping to catch a glimpse of the speaker behind me. But the mirror is empty save for my own reflection. Bewildered, I glance around me, searching for the source of the voice.

“Above you, my dear. That's advice that will serve you well in general. Always remember to look up, even when all seems lost.”

With a feeling of foreboding, I do as the voice bids and look up. I gasp.

An enormous snake is entwined around a branch directly above my head. It's larger than I ever imagined a snake could be. And its skin is fascinating... glittering jewel tones that shimmer in the dappled light filtering through the tree overhead.

Until Bea dragged me through the menagerie at the Lotus, I'd never seen a snake in real life—or any animal for that matter, only robotic simulations. Still, I've read plenty of historical accounts of life before the date Bael gave for the mortal realm having fractured, and at no point in human history did animals ever *actually* talk. Well, other than in fairy tales and myths. Which means...

The creature above me almost certainly isn't a real snake. But when it doesn't speak again, simply winds itself in undulating movements around the branch overhead, then onto the trunk of the tree itself, I begin to wonder.

Maybe the snake didn't actually speak. Maybe my subconscious played a trick on me in a lame attempt to make me feel less alone.

But even as I have the thought, the snake slowly unwinds itself from the tree and slithers onto the bench beside me, sitting there coiled, watching me.

I shiver.

Then the impossible happens. I watch with a mixture of fascination and horror as the snake slowly transforms into a tall, attractive man clad in snakeskin pants, hobnailed boots, and a silk shirt open at the collar. Both the pants and shirt are the same shimmering hard to pin down jewel tones as the snake.

But it's the man himself who makes an icy chill run down my spine. Heavy lidded brown eyes observe me beneath lashes so long that they should be illegal on a man. A wild mop of short curly dark hair that I swear I've seen somewhere...

Dante.

And yet the man sitting beside me is *not* Bea's husband. For one, he carries himself differently. And the voice that spoke to me, the voice that came from the snake...

“Hades?”

“Clever girl, perhaps Hecate was right about you.”

Although the god is no longer taking the form of a giant snake, I can't escape the feeling that he's a predator and I'm prey. And given Bael's admission earlier of the deal he made with his dad, it's quite possible that I am.

He stares at me as if judging me, the beguiling brown of his eyes becoming dark as night, eyes I can't seem to make myself look away from. Eyes I feel compelled to tell all my secrets to.

But I know better, and so I do finally force myself to look away, staring down at the soft mossy ground in front of the bench.

“Oh yes, I think she judged correctly. Not many mortals even think to try to resist.” He pauses, then adds, “Not that you could, if I chose to force the issue.”

Not looking up, I ask, “What do you want from me?”

“Why nothing at all, child. Just a friendly chat. Why should I want anything?” he asks, voice laced with amusement.

Shaking my head, I continue to stare at the ground. “The gods always want something.”

“Look at me, girl,” he orders, a tone of command in his voice similar to the one Bael used that first night. But unlike with Bael, I know it's futile to even try to resist.

I look up.

“That's better,” he says. “It's really no fun to talk to the top of your head.”

Every instinct is telling me to flee, that it's a mistake to linger here with the lord of the underworld. Because as harmless as he may seem now, only moments ago, he was a large snake. A snake that could have crushed my windpipe or bitten me with poisonous fangs.

If Bael discovers the two of you together, he'll lose his shit.

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about that," Hades says dismissively. "I mean, sure, he *would*. You at least know him that well, it seems. But he won't interrupt us here, so if you fear a scene, you need not worry on that count."

I frown. "This is his property. What's to stop him from coming upon us?"

Hades smiles, then points up toward the sky. "Helios, my dear. I'd inquire as to whether my son failed to disclose his affliction to you, were it not for that bruise on your neck."

Inadvertently, my hand goes to my throat, and I feel my face heat.

"Forgive me. I'm being rude. What you and my son do behind closed doors isn't my business. I'm afraid that I'm also keeping you from your breakfast." He snaps his fingers, and a gorgeous red apple appears on the bench between us. "Apple to take the edge off your hunger?"

"Did you really think that would work?" I roll my eyes. "I know better than to accept an apple from a snake."

Hades chuckles. "Smart girl. The witch *definitely* chose well."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, I think you know."

I shake my head. "Actually, I have no clue what you're talking about. What does Hecate have to do with anything?"

"All in time, my dear." He nods toward my Lethe. "Your question earlier for the mirror daemon, you weren't actually trying to conjure a vision of my son, were you?"

The god's question catches me off guard. The idea that the mirror daemon would show me *Bael* in response to that particular question is ridiculous. Isn't it? Because if he loved me with all his heart, then he wouldn't have said the things he just did.

Hades only suggested that to mess with my mind, to try to throw me off balance. Gods do that. Or at least in the myths they do, and so far, Hades seems to be behaving true to form.

I shake my head. "No, not Bael."

"You miss her," he says softly.

"Every single day."

The god gazes at me with what seems to be genuine compassion. "What if I told you there was a way to see her again? I mean to actually speak with her, not just spy on her in Elysium?"

“That’s where she is?” I ask, unable to keep the shock out of my voice.

Hades smiles. “Where else would she be?”

“Not to speak ill of my mother...” I hesitate, unsure how to phrase it in a way that *won’t* sound as if I’m speaking ill of her. Because Mom was amazing. The best mother I could have asked for. But... “I thought that Elysium was reserved for heroes and demigods? And while Mom was great and all...”

“Are you implying that I’ve incorrectly sorted a shade?” A hint of red appears in the god’s eyes.

I shake my head. “No, of course not. It’s just—”

“Countless gods have risen and fallen over the span of centuries that the souls of the dead have been entrusted to my care. You can be assured I make no mistakes, in that regard at least. When it comes to love, however...” He glances down at the apple and sighs. “Let’s just say my track record is less than perfect. But the goddess who crafted this apple *is* an expert in all matters of the heart.”

“I thought we were talking about my mother?”

“We were. We *are*. As I said, Aphrodite is an expert in *all* matters of the heart. She’s not the beautiful brainless dilettante that she’s so often portrayed as.”

“I’m afraid I don’t follow,” I admit.

“It’s simple. The apple before you is powerful magic, old magic, taken from the Garden of the Hesperides. If you so desire, it has the power to reunite you with your mother. To let you actually speak with her, rather than gazing upon her silent form on that silly screen.”

“But I thought those apples were golden?”

Hades sighs. “You’re nearly as literal as my sons, I swear. Don’t be so easily fooled by appearances, girl.”

“I’m sorry,” I say. “But the color of the apple aside, I fail to see how an apple from that garden would reunite me with my mother. Aren’t they supposed to confer immortality? And, well, Mom is...” I trail off, not bothering to finish the sentence.

“Maybe you are more clever than my boys, though that’s not a terribly high bar,” Hades says musingly. When I don’t respond, he continues.

“Look, I’ll be straight with you—you were wise not to taste the apple when offered. It’s a choice not to be entered upon lightly. Because while the origin of this apple is the Garden of the Hesperides, the fruit you see before you was altered by Aphrodite. An apple of immortality, transformed by waters taken from my realm. Bite into this apple, my dear, and it will separate your soul from your body, allowing you to enter Hades where you may find the answer you seek. When you’ve found it, you may return.”

“How...”

But I don’t bother to complete my sentence. The god is already gone. The apple, however, remains.

BAEL

THE SUN STREAMING in through the cottage's gleaming windows mocks me, reminding me of my monstrosity. Because the woman I love ran from me, and I let her. I had no other choice.

Or at least that's what I tell myself for the first few hours after Alyssa leaves. It's both the truth and utter bullshit.

No, I couldn't follow her out into the sun. But there's nothing stopping me from using magic to return to the main house, which I'm sure she's reached by now.

I know I need to return, that we need to talk this through, but I'm not ready to face her yet. Still, remaining at the cottage is nothing but cowardice.

Sighing, I decide to split the difference. Closing my eyes, I focus on the tunnel, preferring to make the journey back to the house by foot rather than magic.

As I walk slowly down the silent tunnel, Alyssa's wounded face fills my mind. I don't know whether I'm more frustrated with her or myself. She was right to be hurt—even if every word I said was true, I'd still take them back if I could.

But I can't. Fuck. I am a monster, in more ways than one. How could I have said something so cruel to her? I mean, it was true, but what was I thinking, wording it that way?

The moment I saw the shocked hurt on her face, I knew how badly I'd fucked up. Not in the sense of Alyssa and I having any sort of future together, but in the sense of...

I crushed a beautiful thing. I crushed the *most* beautiful thing in the entire world—Alyssa's love for me. Love I never deserved. Because I'm not just a monster because I'm a vampire. I'm a monster because I'm my father's son.

And maybe that's why when I reach the cave mouth, I sink down onto the sand rather than using magic to travel the remaining distance back up to the house.

I'm unsure how long I sit there in my misery, staring out at the crashing waves. At some point, however, I become aware that the sun has nearly set. No point in bothering with magic now. I'll simply wait.

Yeah, I'm a coward all right. Because I know I have to not only apologize but also convince Alyssa that I'm right. I can't simply let her run off like that. Maybe we can't be together, but I can at least keep her safe. Somehow.

But then a movement farther out over the waves draws my attention. A seabird wheels overhead then dives into the ocean in pursuit of its prey. I stare at the bird in shock.

Because while this world isn't as fucked as Alyssa's, the natural world is still in pretty bad shape. Seeing an albatross in the north Atlantic is nearly unheard of, and I'm unsure what to make of the omen.

Sailors thought the birds were *good* luck, which was why the ancient mariner killing one was so frowned upon. But still, what does it mean to see a bird flying overhead somewhere where it should be impossible for it to be?

But before I can reflect too long on the omen, I spot a figure dancing on the beach. The braids look familiar, but I wait a few heartbeats, waiting for the figure to move closer, before I know for sure.

Calypso. Executing perfect pirouettes across my beach as if she had the right to be here. Taunting me.

Sensing my gaze on her, the sorceress turns toward the cave and calls out in a mocking voice, "Like all men, you give up too easily. With that attitude, you'll surely lose the girl."

Her words send an icy chill down my spine. "Explain."

She shakes her head. "If you haven't figured it out yet, I can't help you."

I stand, dying to run after her, but the last vestiges of daylight still linger in the sky. "Why are you here, witch?"

But in response, she only says, "You might want to pay a visit to your mother's garden when you get a chance."

And with that ominous statement, she disappears, leaving me alone, heart pounding, to wait for the sun to fully set.

ALYSSA

DARK BRANCHES PRESS DOWN on all sides. A cloying mist clings to my skin, occasionally obscuring the path ahead. The glowing red eyes of creatures more frightening than the snake Hades transformed into track my progress along the well-trod road, hissing when I lose my way and veer too close to the dark underbrush hemming it in on both sides.

The threats surrounding me are both seen and unseen. Because not only are there the obvious ones lurking in the trees and within the mist, but there are also invisible flames that lick at my skin, attempting to impede my progress.

What have I done?

But I know exactly what I've done, know exactly where I am without a tour guide or a map to inform me. I've read enough previous travelers' accounts of this realm to recognize it, to guess where this path leads.

I walk quickly, passing by many of the slower souls meandering along this roadway. Not because I'm afraid, not really, even though perhaps I should be.

No, I'm impatient.

The journey takes longer than I'd like. As I pass through the forest, I keep my left fist closed tight at my side, afraid I'll drop the one object I thought to bring with me.

Soon enough, however, the mist begins to dissipate even as the heat of the flames intensifies. The trees thin and up ahead the path opens onto the damp, rocky shore of a terrible river.

And it is just when the river seems within reach that I step into an expanse of inky nothingness. An absolute negation of ego that tears at my identity, trying to erase my very being.

Knowing it for the illusion it is, I press forward, holding the face of my mother bright and burning in my mind's eye. Across the years and distance, a song reaches me—a lullaby she sang in those days before that final illness sapped the last of her strength.

Softly, I hum along, drawing strength from a melody whose words I've long forgotten. The song carries me through, reminds me of who I am—and of why I'm here.

And then, finally, I'm there, standing on the riverbank I spied in the distance, practically running toward the waiting ferryman.

Charon is nothing like how I envisioned him. A great hulking beast of a man with eyes of swirling flames. His body appears strong, vital, not at all worn down by the endless labor of ferrying the souls of the dead across the Acheron.

The despair in the cool air here on the river's shore makes me certain that the Acheron is indeed the river whose bank I stand on, not the Styx. I'm unsure whether to feel relieved or dismayed at which of the five rivers I'll be crossing. Honestly, they all have their drawbacks.

I come to a stop several feet away from Charon and curtsey, exactly as I learned in finishing school.

"A mortal with manners." The ferryman grins. "Positively refreshing. I'm afraid, however, that you'll still have to pay the fare."

"Of course, good sir," I say, slowly unclenching my left fist and holding my open palm out toward the ferryman.

He glances down at the proffered coin. "Not an obol, but if a tuppence be all you've got, a tuppence will do."

As he takes the coin from my hand, I feel an unexpected twinge of regret at the loss of the first and only gift Bael gave me.

Charon nods understandingly. "Aye, it's difficult, but it wouldn't be a true crossing fee if it weren't dear to ye. Not that you'll be crossing the river today."

"But I paid my fare," I protest, unable to keep the panic out of my voice. If Charon doesn't allow me to cross the river, then I'll never reach my mom.

"That ye did, that ye did, but I'm afraid orders are orders, and I've been instructed to take you not across the river but *down* it. So step aboard, miss, there's already a queue forming behind you."

I stare at the ferryman searchingly, but the swirling flames of his eyes offer no further clue as to what this strange statement might mean. I've never heard of Charon transporting people down the river, only across it. But as affable as he's been so far, something in his expression warns me not to argue with him.

So not seeing that I have a choice, I step onto the ferry.

ALYSSA

TENDRILS of damp despair cling to my skin. A miasma rises off the water, becoming thicker and more cloying the farther we journey down the Acheron. With each inhalation I'm forced to take of the river's stench, I feel my strength draining away, my will weakening.

Was this the right choice? I knew the underworld would be strange, frightening, but I didn't expect it to change *me*—and yet it is. Because I'm getting a personal tour of Hades, and yet I'm so weighed down by sadness that I can barely bring myself to glance up from the damp boards at the bottom of the boat.

“And there on the starboard side, if you look a bit farther off in the distance, is Tartarus,” Charon declares in a perfect tour guide voice.

I try to match his enthusiasm, but all I can manage is a weak, “That's nice.”

“Gods, I've been patient, but you need to snap out of it, lass!” The ferryman slams his oar down so hard I half-fear he'll puncture a hole in the bottom of the boat. But despite the wood's ancient appearance, it holds.

Slowly, I lift my head to meet the strange pools of swirling fire that are Charon's eyes. “What did I do?”

“Nothing! That's the problem. Look, girly, I know the pull of the Acheron is strong, but if you're gonna survive down here, you need to start seeing illusions for what they are.”

I frown. “Excuse me?”

“The Acheron, Alyssa. Cronus's nut sack! Don't act as if you've just drunk a cuppa brewed with water filched from Lethe. We're traveling down the bloody Acheron. *Nothing you're feeling is real.* So snap the fuck out of it and get a grip!”

I don't know whether it's just because the ferryman is, frankly, terrifying or because like Bael he's put the force of actual magic behind his command, but his words have their intended effect. I “snap the fuck out of it,” taking Charon in with fresh eyes.

“Charon, how did you know my name?” I ask.

“The big guy put you on his VIP guest list, love. Not many mortals these days get that honor, I might add. I think the last one was Cobain.”

“Who?”

For some reason, my question causes Charon to laugh. “Oh, you are a rare mortal. No wonder he likes you.” The ferryman slaps his thigh and shakes his head. “99% of the souls who pass through here these days have no bloody clue who *I* am. Who are *you* that you’re astute enough to somehow come prepared with the proper fare, yet you don’t recognize celebrities from your own world?”

“But I thought you knew who I was. You just called me by my name,” I protest.

He shrugs. “Most information down here is on a strictly need-to-know basis. And all I need to know is that your name is Alyssa and I’m to take you to the palace.”

Then as if by magic, the building in question comes into view. A massive black gothic structure looms ahead. Obsidian spires and turrets reach toward the sky. Behind the palace, there appears to be a dark forest, but we’re approaching from the water.

“This is where I must leave you, girl,” Charon says as the ferry comes to a stop on the river, just outside the massive black wall surrounding the palace. I see no gate in the wall, nor any means to scale it.

I stare at him in bewilderment. “Where am I supposed to go now?” I ask. “If you’re abandoning me?”

Charon shakes his head, then laughs. “I’m not abandoning you, merely passing you along to another also in hell’s employ. Look up.”

My eye follows where Charon is pointing, and I see a gorgeous dark-haired woman in a filmy white dress sitting on top of the palace wall. Her expression is solemn, and she doesn’t look happy to see me.

“Go along now,” Charon says encouragingly. “Megara can be a bit grumpy at times, but you’re in good hands.”

“How am I supposed to go to her?” I ask, feeling utterly helpless.

“Oh, that’s easy.” Charon winks. “You simply have to ascend.”

Not rising from my seat on the boat, I look up at the ferryman and frown. “I’m afraid I still don’t follow,” I admit, hating how helpless I feel.

The gruff ferryman holds out a hand. Reluctantly, I take it, allowing him to pull me to my feet. Despite the waves gently rocking the boat, I discover that it’s easier than I assumed to keep my balance.

As if reading my mind, Charon releases my hand and says, “Lesson number one is that you’re no longer corporeal, girl. Your physical form isn’t much better than an illusion operating within other, larger illusions. My own magic gives me special dispensation to ‘touch’ the shades—otherwise, some of the more confused ones would never make it across the river. Like herding cats, ferrying shades is.”

What does Charon mean that I'm a shade? I nearly protest that Hades promised I wouldn't actually *die*, but something holds me back. Charon has been kind so far, but would that kindness continue if he realized that I don't actually belong here? If he thinks I'm a shade, then perhaps it's best to let him continue to operate under that assumption.

So instead I merely say, "I'm afraid that I still don't understand how I'm supposed to reach the top of that wall."

He smiles. "Lesson number two. Hades is more vast than mortal minds can fathom—it has to be to hold all your dead, particularly since the mortal realms fractured—which means that one must often employ unconventional means to travel through it. Normally, this isn't a secret I'd share with a shade so recently arrived, but the boss gave the go-ahead to disclose this in his instructions..." He pauses, then says, "To travel within Hades, all you have to do is think about where you want to go and there you are."

He stops speaking then and looks at me expectantly. While his words make sense on the surface—of course Hades would need to be large—they don't actually offer a way out of my current predicament. I've been *thinking about* reaching the top of that wall since he first said that I needed to, and yet here I am... still stuck on this boat.

I take a deep breath before saying, "But I *have* been thinking about where I want to go. It's not working. Is there some other way?" I pause, mentally running through the more famous descents into the underworld made by Greek heroes. "There's nothing in the myths about Orpheus or Odysseus or Psyche that mentions them using mental telepathy to travel through Hades."

Charon rolls his flaming eyes. "None of those you mentioned were shades. Heroes have to follow different rules because they're taking their mortal bodies down here with them. If it's not worked for you yet, it's because you're simply not trying hard enough. Or perhaps you're trying *too hard*."

Trying to keep my frustration out of my voice and failing, I say, "Are you sure what you're describing doesn't just apply to gods like yourself, sir? There's nothing in the myths about shades being able to move freely around Hades either."

At this, Charon laughs. "Of course there isn't! You think the boss would permit *that* bit of knowledge to slip into the myths that reach mortal ears? Think of it as knowledge that needs to be earned—or in your case, that's been doled out on a need-to-know basis. If all the fresh shades that stepped off my boat realized that their prisons down here were mental, well that would make punishing them mighty difficult now, wouldn't it?"

I bite my lip. "Okay, fair point. But I still don't understand how I'm supposed to reach the top of that wall."

The ferryman shakes his head. "Likely because you don't truly *want* to reach the top of that wall. I know Megara looks formidable, and in many ways she is, but deep down, she's a good egg. The boss told me to turn you over to her for a reason, and I have other souls to ferry so you best be on your way."

"Oh, for crying out loud," Megara calls down from the top of the wall, "stop overcomplicating things, you dumb brute. Toss the girl off the boat, and she'll figure it out soon enough."

Charon looks at me regretfully. “Sorry about this, but I’m afraid she’s right. I have faith in you. It’s really no more difficult than dreaming.”

And with those ominous words, both the ferryman and his boat start to shimmer. Heart pounding, I look upward and meet Megara’s eyes, focusing on my desire to join her.

The boat and its captain disappear. As the cold waters of the Acheron rise over my feet, I feel myself descending into the despair the river promises.

Not breaking eye contact with Megara, I pray to any gods who might be listening as the Acheron’s woeful waters cover my knees. “Help me,” I beg her, knowing instinctively that being submerged in this river is *not* something that I want to do.

The shade holds my gaze. “You don’t need my help. You’re already doing it, or you’d be at the bottom of the river by now. Stop trying so hard and simply trust yourself, that’s how you become unstuck.”

Closing my eyes, I consider both her words and Charon’s. He claimed this was all an illusion. That seems impossible when it feels so real, and yet...

A solid surface materializes beneath my feet, but I keep my eyes closed tight, afraid to see whether it worked...

Because if it did work, then you’re a shade. Hades lied.

Yet knowing I can’t hide from the truth, however uncomfortable it may turn out to be, I force my eyes open. A wave of vertigo washes over me as I look out over the sprawling expanse of Hades far below. I draw in a sharp breath.

Because as I look down on the lands the Acheron winds through, my fear is displaced by regret. Regret that I failed to pay more attention during Charon’s tour. The land laid out below me is... sublime. There’s really no other word for it.

The myths of the underworld are all frustratingly low on details, focused more on their heroes’ triumphs and defeats than on actual scenic descriptions. So the size and scope of the kingdom spread out before me is greater than I ever dared imagine. I turn in a slow circle, trying to take it all in from my new vantage point atop the palace’s wall.

Five distinct rivers, their waters varying colors and hues, crisscross the landscape. And the rivers apparently aren’t the only water in Hades. Water appears in unexpected places all across the landscape—shining pools of inviting, clear cerulean, a lake of fire, what appears to be the edge of an ocean, fetid swamplands.

Far off in the distance, the skyline of an unreal city rises up, a strange mix of Victorian and twentieth-century architecture, lit by a mix of neon signs and gas lamps. Smaller settlements from various time periods are scattered throughout as well. Vast graveyards, too.

I shiver, unsure when my eyesight became sharp enough to allow me to take in all of these individually small details. But Hades is nothing if not richly detailed, and I find that I can’t look away from the macabre miracle of its infrastructure.

Dirt paths, multilane-paved highways, quaint country roads. Train tracks cut a path between the large city and smaller settlements. Upon the ocean's waves ships sail—some kind of massive luxury vessel shares the sea with what appears to be a pirate ship with tattered sails. Farther out, a steel-sided ship rides the waves.

Megara interrupts my inventory of hell, however. "Lady Alyssa," she says, voice solemn as she stands and inclines her head.

I'm unsure of the proper etiquette in this situation. But my teachers at finishing school always said that when in doubt about the correct protocol, behave as the locals do. So I incline my head as well and say, "Lady Megara."

At this, the shade laughs. "Please, I'm a mere servant of the palace. You are a guest of its lord. No title is necessary. I'm a nobody."

I shake my head. "Umm, you know you're pretty famous above ground still, right? I mean, you are *the* Megara who was married to—"

At this, the shade's expression sours, and she cuts me off. "Shall I show you to your room?"

I make a mental note that Heracles is apparently still a sore subject. Which in all honesty, I should have guessed. I mean, he *did* treat her pretty badly.

But wait... "My room?"

"Lord Hades instructed me to prepare a special chamber for you," she explains. "I have no idea what feats you accomplished in life to so impress him, but they must have been wondrous."

I feel my face heat and don't respond. I mean, what can I say? The only "feat" I accomplished was sleeping with Hades's son and having my heart broken. Not exactly my definition of "wondrous."

When I don't reply, Megara adds, "I don't actually give a fig about what you did. I'm just relieved that you're a shade too. The last guest who came to the palace still had her body with her—can you imagine? And guests with corporeal forms do create so much more work."

A chill runs down my spine at Megara's confirmation of my fear. She thinks I'm a shade too. So Hades *did* lie about the consequences of biting the apple, or at the very least misled me.

The full enormity of what I've done hits me like a punch to the gut. But then I remember the real reason I came here, which wasn't to stand atop a wall and gossip with a shade.

"Megara, before you show me to my room, could you take me to Elysium, please?"

She frowns. "Lord Hades said you were to stay in the palace, not Elysium."

"No, I don't want to stay there. It's just, there's someone I need to talk to. And, umm, Lord Hades said I could."

At this, the shade looks skeptical, but finally, she shrugs. "I somehow doubt he said that. But if you insist, I can take you over there. Not that it'll do you any good."

She grasps my hand, well... almost, but not quite. All of my fears are solidified further by the realization that neither of us is quite solid as her matter passes through mine.

But before I can dwell too much on my nonexistent body, everything goes black.

BAEL

“A GLASS COFFIN, isn’t that a bit melodramatic?”

“We had a deal,” I say, not turning to face my father, unable to look away from Alyssa’s still and silent form, unchanged from how I found her. Hair as black as ebony. Lips as red as blood. Face as white as snow.

“A deal you went back on,” he replies. “Or did you forget that the dwarfs are in my employ?”

My fist squeezes the apple in my hand, the same apple I found lying on the ground beside her, nearly perfect save for one missing bite. Whatever enchantments have been placed on it, however, prevent me from crushing it to a pulp.

But no such enchantment has been placed on my heart, which feels as if it’s been eviscerated and tossed down a mineshaft or thrown out to sea. This is my own damn fault for not warning her that my father was determined to take her life.

I did this. Alyssa was the best thing that ever happened to me, and I failed to keep her safe. She looks so still, so serene, but I’m a son of Hades and I know that there’s nothing serene about death.

Lashes the same color as her hair lie still against her face. To a mortal, or at least one who didn’t come too close, she might appear to be asleep. But my preternatural senses say otherwise—she’s dead.

Dead and her shade departed. All because my own fucking father...

Turning, I search his face for an answer, some kind of explanation as to how he could be so cruel. But his expression is blank, impassive. Despite night having fallen, he’s wearing the goddamn sunglasses again.

“Why?” I demand, unable to keep the anguish from my voice. “She was an innocent. Why did you have to drag her into your fucked up plot? Why did you have to take her away from me?”

“I haven’t.”

“Yes, you fucking *have!*” I roar, tossing the apple into the darkness.

“No,” he replies, voice calm. “I merely arranged matters so that you’d see the wisdom of engaging in the ritual that thus far you’ve so stubbornly refused to perform.”

“When I reached her just after sundown, the dwarfs were already here. It was they who conjured the coffin, not I. They confirmed that she’d already been dead for hours, that you’d killed her in the light of day.”

“I didn’t kill her, son. She took that step herself. I may have given her the apple, but she chose to use it of her own free will.” He shrugs. “She knew the consequences of biting it.”

“But there would have *been* no apple for her to bite if you hadn’t given it to her,” I say, voice bitter. “Gods, this is so like you...”

“What is? Looking out for my eldest son? Wanting to see him actually happy for once?”

“No. Executing a half-assed plan, then not bothering to stick around and carry out the most important part. You *know* that the ritual needs to be performed within the first hour after death, if not sooner. You know the danger of delaying!”

“Oh, that.” My father smiles, and I want to punch his perfect, smug face. “That’s only if she were to die by ordinary means.”

“You mean like a pair of hair combs enchanted by a third-rate hedge witch?” I ask, unable to keep the sarcasm out of my voice. “Because that’s how you tried to kill her the first time.”

“Oh, please.” He rolls his eyes. “If I’d wanted her dead, do you really think I’d have hired Calypso to carry that out? I was merely trying to get your attention. I knew that Hecate would have the situation well in hand.”

“Well, she doesn’t this time,” I retort. “She says there’s nothing she can do, no spell she can perform, to undo Aphrodite’s magic.” My stomach clenches at the memory of that conversation.

When I came upon Alyssa lying in that glass coffin, surrounded by a ring of weeping dwarfs in my mother’s garden, I summoned the witch. Unfortunately, she was teaching Beatrice the spell to travel short distances when she felt my call and brought the girl with her.

Both women blamed me, as they should. Hecate was furious, Bea distraught. The witch would still be here, laying into me, if Dante hadn’t begged her to come back to the house and brew Beatrice a sedative.

He raises an eyebrow. “Hecate didn’t tell you how the apple works?”

“Oh, she told me how it works all right.” I glare at him. “An apple from the Garden of the Hesperides, injected with the waters of the five rivers of hell and then charmed by one of the most powerful goddesses alive. Immortality turned in on itself. Hecate said she couldn’t name an object more toxic.”

“Yes, well, Hecate and Aphrodite are barely on speaking terms, so I doubt she questioned the goddess about the apple’s full effects. I, however, did.”

“Yeah, well I can see those effects with my own eyes, and so can you.”

“I can, but I wonder, can you? She’s been dead for hours, Bael. Why hasn’t rigor mortis set in?” he asks, voice patient, pedantic.

The urge to punch him returns but with it also—hope. I examine Alyssa more closely. No air inflates her lungs. No blood passes through her heart. And yet...

I brush a strand of hair away from her face and find the skin soft, supple, warmer than the surrounding air. Bending over the coffin, I run my hands over her body, over the same curves they explored last night, and detect no changes in her muscles. While my other senses tell me that she *is* dead, my sense of touch claims she’s merely asleep.

“Explain,” I say, heart pounding, half-afraid to believe what my own hands have just confirmed.

“As you noted, Aphrodite is one of the most powerful goddesses alive. And the apple *was* taken from the Garden of the Hesperides. Think of her as being in a suspended animation of sorts. She is dead, yes. Her soul departed for my realm hours ago. But her body... Well, let’s just say it will be ready to accept her soul’s return once you find the courage to do what you must.”

“But how?” I shake my head, my earlier despair returning. “Have you forgotten how the ritual works? It’s not enough for me to drink her blood. She must imbibe mine. And how the hell is she supposed to do *that* when the part that animates her is trapped in your realm?”

“Aphrodite assured me that even a drop of your blood on her tongue should be enough to compel the shade to reunite with the corpse. Now mind you, they won’t *stay* reunited if you try to cheat the ritual and fail to offer her an adequate amount of blood. But they should reunite long enough for the ritual to be carried out.”

I don’t respond, not right away, turning his words over in my mind. The apples from the Garden of the Hesperides are old, powerful magic. One of the few things in this creation that can confer immortality upon mortals. And Aphrodite *does* know how to cast abnormally powerful spells, my curse being a prime example of her skills. Still...

“But Hecate said it was too late,” I protest. “She said few things have the power to reunite a shade with its shell, and that they all operate on fairly short timescales. It’s why she didn’t even attempt to brew the potion that saved Bea.”

“Few things can,” he agrees. “But this apple, when combined with the ritual, is one of them.”

“Only if she really is my fated mate.”

“Gods, you’re still trying to claim she’s not? You can lie to me son, you can even lie to her, but you can’t lie to yourself... not forever. If you don’t love her, why did I find you brooding over her body in Kore’s garden?”

“I wasn’t going to risk it, wasn’t going to risk *her*,” I say. “And that was *my* choice to make, and you took it away from me.”

“No, she did. I don’t know exactly what you said to her, son. But when she crossed my path, she was utterly without hope. Strange, don’t you think, for a young woman who’d just found true love.”

My father's words wound with unerring accuracy, just as he intended. Because of course she had no hope. She woke up today, eyes brimming with hope, ready to commit to an eternity with me, and I crushed it. Crushed her. All because I was afraid.

The realization that I'm just as self-centered as my father is a bitter pill to swallow. Even more bitter is the realization that the only thing that can save Alyssa is a love that I may have killed. Gods, the look she gave me when she left...

Still, I have to try.

"So I guess you get your way." I sigh. "You've manipulated me into doing exactly what you wanted all along, not leaving me a choice."

At this, my father frowns. "We always have a choice. Alyssa made hers when she bit the apple. Now it's time for you to make yours. Do you want to be with her, son, or not?"

I shake my head. "What I want doesn't matter. Because the choice before me isn't a life with Alyssa or not. It's whether Alyssa even *has* a life. You manipulated us so that the only thing that can save her is a bloody ritual that I never even wanted to perform!"

Dad sighs. "I said one of the *few* things..."

And then it hits me. "It's in your power to save her, apple or no, isn't it?"

"Of course it is."

"Then save her!"

He shakes his head. "No."

"Fuck you."

"You need to listen to me, Bael. She's at my palace in Megara's care. She's free to remain there as long as she likes. Go. Find her. Propose. Offer to perform the ritual. If she says no..." He hesitates, then continues. "If she says no, I'll bring her back myself. But don't turn your back on love out of anger at me. If you love the girl, go get her, but give her the goddamn choice."

ALYSSA

WE'RE STANDING on the bank of another river. Some instinct warns me not to draw too near to the dark water rushing past. Beyond the far bank, the palace looms in the distance, its obsidian spires reaching toward the sky.

My vision is still better than it has any right to be, another reminder that my current form only outwardly resembles the body I've inhabited for the past twenty-one years. But while my supernaturally enhanced eyesight allows me to observe many details of the landscape of the underworld, the one thing I'd expected to find is conspicuously absent.

I glare at Megara. "You were supposed to take me to Elysium."

"And so I did."

"But I don't—"

She cuts me off. "Turn around, ninny."

When I do as she bids, I realize that we're not merely standing on a riverbank, but on the edge of a vast meadow that borders the river. The meadow from the mirror app.

And yet there are subtle differences between it and the visions the mirror daemon showed me. For one, the meadow is more populated than it has ever appeared in the app. Still, I spot her right away. Maybe a hundred yards off. I run toward my mother...

And crash into an invisible barrier.

Behind me, Megara giggles. "I told you so."

My heart freezes in my chest. Hades didn't just lie about me not dying. He promised that I could speak with my mother. Yet he did so knowing that I wouldn't be given entrance to Elysium.

That's what you get for eating an apple offered to you by a snake.

As the full weight of Hades's betrayal hits me, I want to cry, but the sobs are trapped in my throat. I can see my mother. She's so close, yet somehow farther away than she's ever been.

"Mama!" I cry out, letting years of longing and pain fill the word.

Her shade turns to face me, then drifts toward us. “Alyssa, why are you here? It’s much too soon. Please don’t say that another pandemic came and took you too.”

I shake my head, feeling a stab of guilt at the sadness in her eyes. She’s in Elysium, and if she’s there, she earned it. And there isn’t supposed to be any sadness in Elysium.

“No, Mama, I’m just visiting,” I say, hoping the words aren’t the lie I fear they are.

Behind me, Megara snorts and mutters, “Yeah, right. And I’m the queen of France.”

“Oh, well, that’s nice,” Mom says, then turns her back and begins to drift away.

“Mama, wait! Please!”

She turns back and faces me. “Yes, dear?”

Everything I’ve been longing to say to her all these years evaporates under the weight of her dispassionate gaze. This reunion isn’t how I imagined it would be. *She* isn’t how I imagined she would be.

Yes, that’s my mother standing there, nearly close enough to touch, looking just as she did in life. But she *can’t* touch me—a fact that doesn’t even seem to bother her. She’s supposed to be happy to see me. She’s supposed to have missed me as much as I’ve missed her.

And yet it’s as if she couldn’t care less that I’m here. She has no questions about my life, hasn’t even mentioned my father. My father... the man the algorithm selected for her and yet whom she’d been utterly in love with despite that.

I remember now. My parents’ marriage.

“Mama,” I begin, voice hesitant. “How will I know when I find my one true love?”

She frowns. “Well, I always assumed the algorithm would match you with him, just like it does for everyone else, although it strikes me as somewhat odd that that would be the case, so I can’t say I really know *how* you’ll find him.”

“Why would that be odd?” I ask, perplexed.

She smiles. “Oh, because he’ll be one of Lord Hades’s sons. It always did seem funny that the sons of a god as powerful as he would have to be sorted by an algorithm like common people.”

I swallow hard. “How do you know that my true love will be one of Lord Hades’s sons?”

“Why, because the judges told me when I arrived. Why do you think I’m in Elysium, dear? I’m hardly a hero.” She smiles. “But I *am*, or I guess will be, the mother-in-law of a prince of hell.”

She begins to drift away again. This time, I don’t try to stop her. There’s no point.

Speaking to my mother was supposed to provide me with answers. She was supposed to have some deep wisdom. Instead, our brief conversation has left me with even more questions.

But she never had the answers I sought, and Hades knew that. Yet, still, he sent me here...

I turn to Megara. “Did you hear all that?”

The shade nods. “Oh, I heard it all right. Although I wouldn’t put much stock in it. A lot of the shades become pretty addled down here, particularly the ones who drink too liberally from Lethe and Mnemosyne, which from the looks of how checked out she is, that woman clearly has. Now if you’re through, come along. I still need to show you to your room.”

Megara holds out her hand, but I don’t take it, still replaying my mother’s parting words. The underworld judges told her I’d wed one of Hades’s sons? But I was only a child when she died...

For some reason, the idea of my future husband being decided in advance by some underworld judge unsettles me in a way that knowing that my mate would be assigned by the algorithm never did, although I can’t say why. And yet...

Are Bael and I actually fated? Or did I somehow override fate by biting into his father’s apple? Can mortal choices override fate? But then again, was this even my choice, or did I simply play right into Hades’s hands? Maybe he doesn’t want me to marry his son, maybe that’s why he tricked me with the apple...

Megara clears her throat. “Stop woolgathering and take my hand. I do have other duties, you know. Not all of us are Hades’s pets.”

The shade’s personality is abrasive, but what did Charon say about her? That deep down she was “a good egg”? I’m unsure what he meant by that expression, but what I do know is that so far she’s been more honest and open with me than Hades or Hecate—or even Bael or my mother, for that matter.

“Lady Megara,” I begin hesitantly, “do you believe in fate?”

The shade eyes me contemplatively. I hold my breath, waiting for her reply, hoping that for once I’ll get an answer that doesn’t lead to more questions.

But before I can exhale, bells start pealing. I turn toward the sound, facing the river once more.

Movement in the distance draws my attention. A black coach emerges from a grove of trees. The coach is pulled by a team of six black horses. Behind the coach, a wooden wagon follows with something I can’t make out gleaming atop it.

We watch in silence as the procession moves toward the palace. As it does, my vision focuses, allowing me to make out the object on the wagon...

I turn to Megara. “What’s that on that wagon?”

“It appears to be a coffin,” she says in a bored tone.

“Umm, I’m taking it that processions like that are common?”

“No, only when someone really important dies.” Megara shakes her head. “The whole rigamarole is a bit of a waste, if you ask me. It’s not as if you can take your body with you. Whole lot of symbolic, sentimental nonsense.”

My earlier feeling of foreboding growing, I question her further. “Do you know who’s in that coach?”

The shade shrugs. "It bears the family seal, so I assume a member of our Lord's family. I mean, it could also be Lord Hades, but he hasn't set foot down here in years, so it's more likely to be one of the princes."

And suddenly I know. Bael is in the carriage. And if that's Bael in the carriage...

It's me in the coffin.

BAEL

I BREATHE a sigh of relief when we finally pass over the palace drawbridge. Despite my apprehension over the conversation Alyssa and I need to have, I'm eager to escape the crowded carriage. The bloody dwarfs insisted on accompanying me into hell, claiming only they could be trusted to carry their precious glass coffin into the palace.

While I was sorely tempted to force them to ride on the wagon with the coffin they're so attached to, it seemed prudent to keep them close. Because while they may claim that accompanying Alyssa is why they came, I still don't trust them not to defect back to Hades at the first opportunity. And the last thing I want to have to do is play hide and seek with seven recalcitrant dwarfs in the underworld—which, if I lose them, my father will definitely make me do.

When we come to a stop before the palace doors, all seven start shoving each other and swearing up a storm as they vie to be the first to exit the carriage. Once the last dwarf has tumbled out onto the flagstones, I step out of the carriage, prepared to greet Megara. But she's nowhere in sight.

Instead, my father's head chef steps forward, anxiously twisting his white cap in his meaty hands. "Lord Bael." He inclines his head. "My apologies. I would have had a feast prepared, but no one warned us of your arrival."

Quickly, I spare a glance for the dwarfs who've climbed up onto the wagon and are arguing among themselves over the best way to lower the coffin to the ground. Relieved that all seven are accounted for, I turn back to the chef.

"Don't worry about it," I say. "This visit was unplanned. But where's Megara?"

The shade of Heracles's wife isn't my favorite denizen of Hades, but Dad said he'd entrusted Alyssa to her care. So where the bloody hell is she?

"I'm afraid I cannot say, Lord Bael. She's been absent from the palace for some hours. Of course, as we weren't expecting your arrival..."

I begin to feel a sense of misgiving. Because while Megara may often be a bit unpleasant to deal with, she runs my father's palace with an admirable efficiency. Or at least she usually does. It's unlike her to play hooky. Particularly when my father has given her an important assignment.

"Where is the new arrival that my father entrusted to her care?" I demand.

“I’m unsure, my lord. Megara had the maids quite in a fluster earlier, preparing Queen Persephone’s chamber for her. But as far as I know, she hasn’t yet arrived.”

Gods, this is a clusterfuck, but I’m not terribly surprised. My criticism earlier of my father’s ability to actually execute a plan was based on a lifetime of experience. Because while he loves making dramatic gestures, he often seems to find the actual details to be beneath him. So of course he would fucking misplace Alyssa in Hades.

Not answering Paulo, I turn my attention back to the dwarfs, relieved to see that they’ve managed to unload the coffin from the wagon and are huddled around it awaiting my instructions. I hesitate, considering the best course of action.

Hades is the largest of all the realms. It has to be to accommodate the legions of mortal dead. Locating any one shade can be a tedious process—particularly if they haven’t been judged. And given that the entire reason my father caused this whole fiasco was to force me to perform the ritual, he wouldn’t have sent Alyssa to the Plain of Judgment.

My stomach clenches as I realize that the most prudent course of action is to simply do nothing, or rather, to take the coffin into the palace and wait for Megara. Logic says that Alyssa is likely with her—Megara isn’t the type to shirk an assigned duty. If Megara returns and Alyssa is *not* with her, well... fucking hell, I’ll cross that bridge later if I have no other choice.

But the two must be together. They *have* to be. Because the thought of Alyssa wandering around Hades alone is untenable.

“Are you certain that it was my father’s intent that the new arrival reside in my mother’s chamber?” I ask, desperately hoping that the chef misspoke.

But to my dismay, Paulo nods. “Yes, my lord. Your father’s instructions were very explicit. The new arrival was to be treated with the utmost respect and given the highest honors.”

“But did he actually say that she was to be given *that* room?” I press.

“Yes, Lord Bael. The instructions were very detailed.” He frowns. “Come to think of it, not like your father at all. Megara thought you must have had a hand in the arrangements.”

With a sigh, I turn to the dwarfs. “You heard him. Take the coffin to the queen’s chamber.”

ALYSSA

MEGARA COMES to a stop outside an ornate wooden door. “Your chamber, my lady.” “But I already told you,” I say, frustrated. “I don’t want to go to my room. I need to speak with Lord Bael.”

The shade presses her lips together, then says, “Be that as it may, you do not make the rules here. Lord Hades does. And his instructions were very clear. I am to take you to *your* chamber, not Lord Bael’s. It’s bad enough that we took that detour through Elysium. I have other responsibilities to attend to other than you, you know. Now you will stop arguing and do as I say.”

Realizing that I’m getting nowhere, I sigh and reach for the doorknob. To my frustration, my hand passes through it.

I turn to Megara. “Now what?”

“You’ll become more adept at manipulating matter in time,” she replies. “For now, just pass through the door. The wood won’t stop you if the doorknob didn’t.”

I want to ask why she can’t just open the door for me, but it’s clear that the shade is determined to be difficult. So despite my apprehension, I take a few steps back, then taking a deep breath, walk toward the door. I can’t help but feel slightly sick. Every instinct I have tells me to stop before hitting the wooden barrier, but suppressing my queasiness, I press forward.

Passing through the door as if it were no more substantial than water, I pause on the other side, expecting Megara to follow me. But when a few moments pass and she doesn’t also float through the door, I realize that I’ve been abandoned.

Regretting how easily I caved to her bossiness, I turn and attempt to return to the hall, determined to run after her and insist that she take me to Bael. I’m still unsure exactly what I’ll say to him after the fight we had the last time we spoke. He made it clear that he doesn’t want to be with me, whatever the judges may have told my mom. Yet if anyone will know how I’m supposed to return to the mortal realm, he will. I run toward the door.

But to my dismay, I discover that the formerly permeable door has now become a solid barrier. And when I try the doorknob, my hand once again passes through it. Great. Not only am I alone, but I’m apparently a prisoner as well.

Not having anything else to do, I take in my accommodations. Unlike the cold stone of the rest of the palace, the floor of this room is covered by soft, dyed rugs. Rich tapestries line the walls. All of the furnishings are made of gleaming mahogany polished to a glossy sheen.

The room is definitely top quality, and I wonder whether all the rooms in the palace are like this. Probably. And not really that surprising given that Hades doesn't merely control the underworld but all the wealth found below ground.

But the wealth on display isn't the most astonishing aspect of this room. As fine as they are, the tapestries, rugs, and furniture aren't the part that's so breathtaking. No, that would be the plant life.

Potted plants cover nearly every surface and line the walls, creating a vibrant, lush atmosphere. But even more impressive is the canopy of blooming foliage in one corner, beneath which lies a massive four-poster bed covered with a thick duvet and piled with pillows.

Choosing to ignore the bed for the moment, I drift toward a large window that dominates the far wall. But when I reach the window and look out, I gasp. Because the window looks out on a garden nearly identical to the one in which I met Hades.

And where I made the biggest mistake of my life.

What had I been thinking to trust Bael's father? The myths are littered with tales of gods tricking mortals. I always wondered how the protagonists could be so foolish. Now I know.

Because as I stare out at the verdant, sunny scene below, all I can think about is how badly I messed up. Because as much as I want to blame Hades, my death was of my own doing. I was too caught up in feeling sorry for myself to think straight, not bothering to carefully consider the offer the god was making. What had he actually said about the apple?

It will separate your soul from your body, allowing you to enter Hades where you may find the answer you seek. When you've found it, you may return.

Okay, so maybe I didn't die, at least not permanently. Yet I suspect Hades knew that speaking with my mother would be pointless. So the question is whether he was just trying to trick me, trapping me here, or whether he expected me to find the answer elsewhere. Not that I ever told him what I wanted to ask my mom, yet somehow, I suspect he knew.

How will I know when I've found my one true love?

Staring out at the garden isn't bringing me any closer to the answer than talking with my mother did. And I'm unsure how I'm supposed to figure out anything imprisoned in a fancy bedchamber.

Quarreling voices in the hall interrupt my thoughts. Voices I recognize. The dwarfs.

Then the door begins to swing open, and I panic, hiding behind a large potted fern. I'm unsure why I don't want the dwarfs to know I'm here, but I don't. So I watch silently from my hiding place as they enter the room carrying the coffin I spotted on the wagon.

Up close, I see that the coffin is translucent, made out of glass, leaving me with no doubts as to the identity of the person inside. *I am* in that coffin, exactly as I feared when Megara said the carriage

belonged to one of Hades's sons.

But before I can fully process the shock of seeing myself lying in a coffin made of glass, a tall, dark figure enters the room, face grim. Bael.

I remain hidden as he curtly instructs the dwarfs to place the coffin on the bed before ordering them to leave. Then after the door closes behind the last dwarf, he sinks down onto the bed, staring down at the dead girl within, expression pained.

And somehow, the anguish etched onto his handsome features answers the question my mother couldn't. Because every action he's taken from the moment he saved me from the cursed hair combs was done solely to protect me.

Even breaking my heart.

Bael never said he didn't love me. That was my own insecurity distorting his words. What he'd actually said was...

You're too precious to risk.

I step out from my hiding place and approach the bed, but he doesn't seem to notice me. How could he when he hasn't once looked up from my dead body?

Gazing down into the coffin, he's the picture of pure misery. And watching him, I hurt too. Because *I* did this to him by biting that stupid apple. I'm the one who hurt him.

And I'm the only one who can make it right.

I drift nearer to him, but still, he doesn't look my way, not even when I'm standing right next to the bed. Finally, I can't stand it, and I call out his name.

“Bael.”

He looks up. “Alyssa.”

My voice freezes at the sight of so many emotions playing out across his face. When I don't reply, he reaches toward me...

And his hand passes through my arm.

Suddenly, I fear that maybe I won't be able to make this right. What if my action in the garden really *can't* be taken back?

“I'm so sorry, love. But I can fix this. My dad can undo this. I made him swear it—”

I cut him off. “You have nothing to apologize for, Bael. I'm responsible for everything that happened. If I hadn't bitten that apple...”

“You never would have been alone with my father in the first place if I hadn't driven you away. And you never would have accepted the apple from him if I'd warned you that he'd threatened to use it if I refused to perform the ritual.”

I shake my head. “The part I don’t understand is *why*. Why does your dad want me dead?”

Bael sighs. “He doesn’t.”

“Could have fooled me...”

“His hope was that if you died, I’d agree to perform the ritual.”

When I don’t answer right away, he continues. “But you don’t have to worry. My dad can be an asshole, but he’s always fair when it comes to mortals. He has the power to undo this himself, and he will.”

“What if I don’t want him to undo it?” I ask.

“Please...” Once more, Bael reaches for me before remembering he can’t touch me. “I understand if you never want to see me again once we get you out of here. But don’t throw your life away. You still have so many years ahead of you. And...”

“And what?” I prod.

“And I can’t bear the thought of a world without you in it.” He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a ring. “Before I fucked everything up back at the cottage, my plan was to give this to you.... And I swear, what happened last night, when I bit you, it won’t happen again. I promise.”

“What are you saying, Bael?”

“Can we please start over, go back to before I said those awful things? I know you can’t actually put this on right now, but... once we get my dad to undo this, will you? Please? Will you marry me?”

“I can’t marry a vampire.”

He looks away. “Of course, not. After what I did last night, how could I fault you for that? I’m a monster.”

“Look at me, Bael Styx.” I wait until he turns his head toward me, then I say, “You aren’t a monster. But I can’t stand the thought of watching the man I love suffer under a curse every day...”

Voice raw, Bael says, “You don’t have to rub it in. I get it, the answer’s no.”

I shake my head. “I didn’t say that...”

“Then what are you saying?”

“No, you don’t understand,” I protest. “You aren’t a monster, but I would be one to stand there, day after day, and watch the man I love suffer under a curse that it’s within my power to end. I want to marry you, but I can’t agree to that... not yet. Ask me again later, after we perform the ritual.”

“But if the ritual fails...”

“It won’t fail.”

“You don’t know that.”

I smile at him. “Yes, actually, I do.”

ALYSSA

BAEL LOOKS at me across the glass coffin. “You know you can still change your mind. There are other ways to get you out of here...”

“Bite me, Bael,” I say, unable to keep either the nerves or the impatience out of my voice.

Because despite my confidence that the ritual will work, Bael’s doubts are giving *me* doubts. Anxious to get this over with, I wait for him to bite my frozen body. But instead, he bends down and gently kisses the lips of the girl sleeping in the glass coffin.

Except this isn’t a fairy tale, and the girl doesn’t wake up.

But as Bael brushes her hair aside, he looks like a fairy-tale prince tenderly gazing on his princess. That is until he bends down and sinks his fangs into her neck.

And then darkness surrounds me even as the most exquisite sensations rush through my body. I can’t open my eyes, but the silk lining of the coffin caresses my skin as pure bliss washes over me.

Bael’s scent surrounds me even as the fiery feel of his mouth pressed against my neck causes pulses of pure desire to travel through me, culminating in my core. And just as when he bit me before, it’s not enough. I’m gripped by the same longing for *more*, the need for him to keep drinking and not stop.

He’s promised me that this time he won’t. That should probably scare me, but I’ve never felt safer than I do now with this man’s fangs buried in my neck.

And as he continues to drink from me, the connection between us deepens. But still, it’s not enough. My soul strains toward his, striving to move closer, desperate for us to become one.

And then my vision returns. Bael and the coffin are both gone, and I’m back in the dark wood. This time, however, I’m desperate to *not* meet Charon, and I can only pray to any gods who are listening that Bael completes the next step of the ritual in time. And yet I know time is against us as I’m pulled along the path, my feet scraping against the road as I do everything in my power *not* to meet the ferryman.

But then the sweetest nectar fills my mouth, sliding down my throat. The forest disappears, and I open my eyes to see Bael leaning over me, his wrist pressed against my mouth.

“Drink, love,” he begs me.

My desire for survival is strong enough that I need no encouragement. I greedily drink all he offers me until darkness claims me once more. But there's no dark forest this time. There's nothing at all.

I'm alone in a sea of inky nothingness. Adrift. I don't know how long I float there, but it feels like an eternity. An eternity separated from Bael, from my own body, from everything I ever knew.

Gradually, however, consciousness returns. At first, I'm unsure how I ended up in what appears to be a coffin. But then my gaze falls on a dagger resting beside me, metallic against the satin lining, and my memories return too.

I sit up, remembering now what I have to do.

Bael winces as I grab the knife and slash open my wrist. But we've come too far to stop now, too far to only do this halfway. The knife burns, but I don't care. I press my wrist against Bael's mouth, watching with relief as he drinks.

The pleasure I felt when he bit my neck is gone. This simply hurts, but not unbearably so.

"Enough," he says finally, pushing my wrist away.

I stare at him. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, your blood tastes different. Metallic almost. But honestly, there's only one way to find out... and we can't do that here."

Then he places his hands around my waist and lifts me out of the coffin before banishing it with a wave of his hand. Sitting on the edge of the four-poster bed now, I take in my surroundings with new eyes. All the plants, the garden view...

"This was your mother's room, wasn't it?" I ask.

Bael sits next to me on the bed and takes my hand. For a moment, it seems as if he won't answer, but then he nods. "I honestly don't know why Dad instructed the staff to place you here. He's kept this room as a shrine to her. I doubt anyone has set foot in here for years. I know I haven't."

I turn toward him. "Maybe that's why."

He frowns. "I'm afraid I don't follow."

I hesitate, unsure how to put it into words. Finally, I say, "Maybe he wanted to remind you how much he loved her."

"It's possible." Bael sighs. "There were parts of the underworld she loved, not many, but some. And this room was definitely one of them. I spent so many hours in here as a child..." He trails off.

I squeeze his hand and don't say anything. I'm unsure what I could say. Because as the silence stretches between us, I realize that I may love this man, he may be my fated mate, but there's still so much about him that I don't know.

And yet the bond between us feels even stronger than before. Everything he feels, I feel. Which is how I know that he's terrified to find out whether the ritual actually worked.

Jumping off the bed, I stand and pull him to his feet. “Come on,” I say. “I want to watch the sunrise with you.”

BAEL

THE LOTUS ADJOINS the mortal realms. Taking my private elevator up to the surface is the quickest way to reach the real sun rather than the illusions my father and I are too adept at crafting. I glance at my watch. If we hurry, we can reach mortal Las Vegas before sunset.

Yet a strange sentimentality I haven't felt in years causes me to hesitate. Mentally, I do the math. Yes, it will be just after dawn *there*. It's nothing but foolish nostalgia to travel all that way, but now that the idea has occurred to me, waiting any longer to return feels impossible.

Heart pounding, I take Alyssa's hand and lead her silently through the sepulchral halls of my father's palace. At the end of the corridor, I murmur a spell and a tapestry hanging on the wall curls up, revealing a heavy oak door that swings open.

As we step onto the dimly lit landing of the servants' staircase, Alyssa looks up at me. "Where are we going?"

"Somewhere I haven't visited in much too long," I say, then we begin our descent.

When we reach the kitchens, all is quiet, the hearths unlit. It's been years since I've been down here, and the contrast between the present and my childhood memories is painful—another reminder of the damage my parents' choices have caused.

While I'm sure if I summoned him, Paulo would appear and put his staff to work, we have no time to dine now. But I make a mental note to speak with him, offer him a position in my realm, if nothing else. Just because both my parents have fled hell and their responsibilities, doesn't mean a talent such as his should languish unused in the underworld.

As we slip outside into Paulo's herb and vegetable garden, Alyssa shivers, despite her long sleeves. I feel a selfish surge of elation at this proof of my beautiful girl's discomfort. Shades don't feel the cold. Even if the ritual *has* somehow failed—unlikely since Alyssa is fully lucid, not the mindless monster so many of Dante's brides became—we *did* succeed in reuniting her soul with her body. Her small hand in mine already proved that, but I'm still grateful for this additional sign that she's truly alive.

Alive and beautiful beneath my father's false sunset—and *mine*.

Releasing her hand, I remove my jacket and drape it over her shoulders. “Sorry, love, it’s always autumn in hell. Or at least it is in the parts nearest the heart of my father’s power.”

She slides her arms into the too-large sleeves, pushing the right one up so that she can once more take my hand. “Because of your mother’s...” She hesitates. “Absence?”

Grateful for her tact, not ready to fully dredge up those memories again so soon, I nod. “Spring used to occur down here with her return,” I explain as we begin walking again, crossing the garden and slipping out through a rear gate. “When she never returned, well...”

But thankfully, Alyssa doesn’t force me to explain further as we walk down the shaded path to the stables. She simply says, “Well, I guess I should just be thankful that he didn’t choose winter.”

At that, I laugh. “Oh, at first he did. But then Paulo threatened to quit when the snow killed his vegetables.”

“Paulo?”

“The palace’s chef,” I explain. “His talent is unparalleled in any of the realms. Other gods have tried to lure him away, including the Big Z, but he said he had no intention of wasting his talents on a bunch of overindulged, emotionally stunted Olympians when everyone knows that the best parties are in hell.”

At this, Alyssa raises an eyebrow. “There are parties in hell? The palace seemed so...”

“Sepulchral? Tomblike? *Dead*?”

“Well, I was going to say *quiet*,” she says, “but yeah, any one of those adjectives will do.”

“It wasn’t always like that,” I explain as the stables come into view. “Father loves to entertain, and shades can eat the dishes Paulo provides—as well as those served in Hades’s less illustrious dining rooms.”

“Shades can eat?” she asks. “How? I was having trouble touching anything material earlier.”

Her observation forces me to recall the image of poor Elvis staring forlornly at his favorite sandwich at the Lotus, and I feel a stab of guilt. Maybe Hecate had a point about my treatment of shades. Mentally, I vow to release him from his contract early and send him down to Restless Ricky’s, where he’ll be able to indulge his gluttony to his heart’s content.

“You would have mastered it eventually—well, at least in relation to most of the objects down here. But shades can’t touch material objects belonging to mortals,” I explain. “Which is why Paulo, as well as legions of other demons in my father’s employ, provide them with meals never tainted by mortal hands.”

“But they don’t need to eat, do they?” she asks as we step into the warm silence of the stables.

Before I can answer, a stable boy runs up to us. “Lord Bael.” He bows. “Your team from earlier is still recovering from the journey, but I can provide you and the lady with alternate mounts.”

I shake my head. “We’ll only need one steed today. Is Pegasus still sojourning down here by any chance?”

The stable boy—who does indeed look like a mortal boy of about eleven or twelve, other than his forked tail—nods. “Yes, sir, he is. Claims it’s less congested down here these days. Would you like me to summon him?”

I nod, and the demon runs off. “To briefly answer your question, no, shades don’t need to eat. But recreating temptations—or as he prefers to call them, ‘delicacies’—from the mortal realms is part and parcel of my father’s Machiavellian treatment of mortals within his realm. Also,” I add, “my dad is a total hedonist and hates to indulge alone.”

Alyssa frowns as she processes all of this, and I can almost see the questions forming behind her eyes.

Sliding a finger beneath her chin, I tilt her head up toward me and hold her gaze. “We’ll have eternity, love, for me to satisfy all of your curiosity about the mythology you hold so dear.”

She looks up at me, eyes serious. “You really believe that? You’re certain that the ritual worked?”

My stomach clenches at her question. No, I’m not completely certain that it worked. I can’t quite let myself fully embrace that hope. Because if it did, then everything I’ve longed for all of these years is about to finally come true.

But all I say is, “We’ll find out soon enough.” I gesture toward the returning stable boy and the massive, white, winged horse walking at a stately pace at the demon’s side.

When they reach us, I bow. “Pegasus, it’s my pleasure to introduce you to Alyssa, my fiancée.”

Beside me, Alyssa gasps. “Oh my god, you’re real!” She squeals before catching herself and curtsying. “It’s such an honor to actually meet you.”

Pegasus inclines his head toward Alyssa. Then choosing to ignore Alyssa’s starstruck reaction to him, he stares at me with piercing blue eyes that bear an uncomfortable resemblance to his mother’s. “So the rumors are true then, cousin? The curse is finally lifting?”

Swallowing hard, I say, “That’s my hope. Dante, at least, is cured.”

“I’d heard tell that he’d awoken, but hadn’t dared hope...”

Releasing Alyssa’s hand, I say, “Stay with the stable boy a moment, love. I need to speak with my cousin.” Then I exit the stable, gesturing for Pegasus to follow me.

In the cool air of the stable yard, I explain my plan to Pegasus, finishing with, “I do realize it’s beneath you, and we could take one of my father’s steeds. But you saw her reaction to you. She’s more in awe of you than she’d be of any mortal celebrity. She’s devoted her academic career to studying our myths. Flying on you... well, it would mean the world to her.”

Pegasus neighs and tosses his flowing mane. “Bael Styx, you surprise me. And here I thought Dante was the romantic one.”

I roll my eyes. “So will you help me? Please?”

Pegasus glances back toward the stables, where Alyssa stands with one hand on her hip, glaring at us. “You certainly irritated the chit by dragging me out here to gossip like schoolgirls and excluding her. You may need my help just to get back in her good graces. What are you prepared to offer me in return?”

At his question, my heart sinks. Thanks to my father, Pegasus already has all he wants—endless meadows to roam in and unpolluted skies to fly across, unmolested by mortal aircraft. Perhaps there’s some other desire he harbors, but if so, I don’t have the faintest clue what that might be.

The winged horse laughs at my obvious discomfort. “Relax, Bael. I saw the way you look at each other. There’s no way the ritual didn’t work. Seeing you step out into sunlight will be payment enough.”

“You want to come to the surface?” I ask, unable to keep the surprise out of my voice.

“Dude,” he says, doing a perfect imitation of the annoying surfer attitude I often have to put up with from the twins, “did you really think I’d miss witnessing that bitch’s handiwork undone? Come on!”

Pegasus has spent so many centuries in Hades that it honestly *hadn’t* occurred to me that he’d want to accompany us to the surface when I’d asked if he could transport us across Hades. In my mind, I’d envisioned me and Alyssa stepping out into the sunlight hand in hand *alone*. Yet she really would be thrilled by the experience of flying across hell on my cousin’s back...

Reading my mind, Pegasus sighs. “Don’t worry. I’ll make myself scarce after I confirm with my own eyes that her curse really *can* be broken.” Then, not waiting for me to reply, he calls over his shoulder, “Hey, goddess girl, get over here!”

Alyssa shoots me a puzzled look but walks over. When she reaches us, she looks up at Pegasus. “Umm, were you addressing me?”

Pegasus rolls his uncanny blue eyes at Alyssa, then shoots her a look that I’m half-afraid *will* somehow turn her into stone. “I don’t see any other goddess girls around here.” He kneels down. “Well, get on.”

“My cousin has been kind enough to agree to transport us across Hades,” I explain.

Realizing that even with Pegasus kneeling Alyssa is still too short to easily mount him on her own, I grasp her waist and swing her up onto his back. Then climbing up onto him myself, I wrap my arms around her.

Pulling her tight against me, I whisper into her ear, “Relax, I’ve got you.”

“What did he mean that I’m a goddess girl?” she replies, voice low.

“You do realize that I can hear you, right? Mythological creature with divine hearing and all,” Pegasus says as he springs up from his kneeling position, his massive wings slowly beating back and forth.

Alyssa gasps as he launches into the air, and I hold her more tightly to reassure her despite trusting Pegasus not to make any sudden moves that would dislodge us. My embrace has its intended effect, and she relaxes against me as we gain altitude.

“I’m sorry, sir,” she says in a louder voice. “But what did you mean that I’m a goddess?”

“Bael didn’t explain the ritual to you before convincing you to perform it?” he asks, voice incredulous.

“No, he did, but I still don’t see...”

“So he explained the part where, if it works, you’re immortal then—didn’t he?”

“Yes, but...” she trails off, voice uncertain.

And that’s when I realize that she somehow *didn’t* know. Mentally, I replay our conversations... Fuck. I was so worried about making her understand the risk and drawbacks of performing the ritual that I forgot to spell out the fine print.

I’m unsure whether to feel relieved or annoyed when Pegasus does exactly that, saying, “To break Aphrodite’s curse, you had to exchange blood with my cousin. Per the terms that psychotic cunt laid out, the experience would either turn you into a deranged, bloodthirsty monster or make you immortal. Since it doesn’t appear to have done the former... Well, if you’re as brilliant as my cousin claims, you can connect the dots.”

Alyssa twists around and looks up at me. “You think I’m brilliant?”

“You flirted with a line from Yeats, love.” Bending down, I brush my lips against hers. “So yes, I think you’re brilliant and adorable and sexy...” Her lips part beneath mine, and I deepen the kiss.

“Hey!” Pegasus protests. “I agreed to be a taxi service, not an airborne motel room. You two can suck face when we land.”

Breaking the kiss, I raise my middle finger, flipping off the back of my cousin’s head. Blushing, Alyssa gives me a horrified look, likely assuming that the gesture will offend Pegasus.

Briefly, I consider telling her that the winged horse doesn’t have eyes in the back of his head. Except that would beg the question of how he *had* guessed what we were up to... I suspect she would be even more horrified if I pointed out that horses have a better sense of smell than humans and he likely scented her arousal.

I’m sure as hell aware of it—as well as every place where our bodies touch. And being this hard while riding on my cousin’s back isn’t exactly a comfortable experience. To distract both of us, I decide to play tour guide, pointing out the various areas of Hades we’re flying over, all just visible in the remains of the dying light.

My attempt at distraction seems to help Alyssa’s embarrassment more than my arousal. But thankfully, Pegasus finally begins his descent. When he touches down in Persephone’s grove, I can’t climb down soon enough.

Alyssa is a bit more cautious in her dismount, apprehensively eying the distance between the winged horse's back and the ground. But when I hold out my arms, she nods and jumps—trusting me to catch her.

She falls into my arms, and I pull her close, burying my face in her hair and inhaling the intoxicating scent of her before taking a step back. "Welcome to my mother's grove."

Alyssa looks around the circle of black willows and poplar trees in which we stand, face puzzled. "It's beautiful, but how will it help us know whether the ritual worked?"

"It won't," I say, approaching a white poplar, the sole tree in the clearing's center, "but that will."

BAEL

ALYSSA's continued confusion is plain on her face as she looks from the tree to me then over at Pegasus, waiting for one of us to offer an explanation. But knowing that in this case simply showing will be more efficient than trying to explain, I close my eyes and place my palm against the poplar's trunk, willing it to recognize my magic—and my blood.

Behind me, Alyssa gasps and I open my eyes. When I turn around, I'm relieved by what I find.

Because before our eyes, the floor of the grove is transforming. Several feet away, where the land once was flat, a mossy mound has appeared—a mound that even as we watch enlarges further, shaping itself into a yawning cave mouth.

Pegasus swishes his tail, then approaches the cave's entrance ahead of us. The space is vast enough that the large winged horse easily enters it, not even having to duck his head.

I take Alyssa's hand. With my other hand, I gesture toward the yawning cavern that's already swallowed my cousin. "Shall we?" I say.

She looks up at me. "It's not that I don't trust you, Bael, but where does it lead? How will venturing deeper into Hades tell us whether the ritual worked?"

"We have a bit of a hike ahead of us still. I'll explain while we walk," I say, gently tugging her hand and leading her toward the cave.

She doesn't resist, and so we walk, side by side, into the cavern's mouth. The vestibule is shallow and just as I remember it—in reality nothing more than the start of a tunnel that leads deep into the soil of Hades. We begin our descent down the gently sloping pathway, and I glance over at her as she takes in her surroundings, curious what she'll make of them.

Because while the cave and the tunnel it protects are both fairly unremarkable in and of themselves, the thousands of enchanted candles my father spelled into the tunnel's walls are, well, breathtaking. But even more breathtaking is the woman at my side—and the fact that she somehow trusts me enough to follow me into what for all intents and purposes appears to be the bowels of hell.

"So this tunnel goes between the mortal realm and the underworld?" Alyssa asks.

I nod. "It's the original one he abducted her through—although it wasn't quite like this back then."

Alyssa squeezes my hand to show that she understands who *she* is, then asks, “The part I don’t understand is if this tunnel travels between the underworld and the mortal realm, why are we headed *down*?”

“The descent is temporary—and also something of an illusion,” I say, then sigh. “The intersection of mortal physics and my father’s magic isn’t really my strong suit. Hecate has explained it to me before, but… well, if you’re really curious, you should probably ask her—or him.”

She doesn’t reply, and we walk in silence for a moment. There’s more I want to say, but, I wait, listening to Pegasus’s hoofbeats up ahead, waiting for them to grow fainter.

When they’ve all but faded I say, “Once I asked my father why he went so overboard on the candles.” I keep my voice low, wanting to only share this moment with Alyssa and no one else.

“Did he tell you?” she asks, voice equally hushed.

“Yes. He said it was because he wanted to make sure that she could always find her way home.”

“Oh,” she says, then adds, “I never realized he was so… romantic.”

“While he has a softer side than many of the myths suggest, he can also be incredibly cruel to those he loves.” I take a deep breath, then continue. “The tree back there, it isn’t just a tree. Dad doesn’t leave unguarded exits out of his realm. The spirit of a nymph is trapped inside.”

I wait as Alyssa turns this information over in her mind. I’m both impressed and not terribly surprised when she finally says, “Leuce?”

I sigh, then nod. “Yeah, unfortunately.”

“So the myths saying he turned her into a tree upon her death that he placed in Elysium are wrong?”

“No, I suspect that was what he did with her originally. Moving it to my mother’s grove and making *her* the guardian Mom had to pass every time she entered and left was just one of the head games he played with her.”

“So the two didn’t overlap?” she asks, then adds, “Your mom and Leuce I mean.”

“I knew who you meant—and no. Dad can be cruel, sadistic even, but he was always faithful. Unlike most gods, he prefers serial monogamy over infidelity.”

“A serial monogamist with an abduction fetish,” she remarks. “Charming.”

“Regretting the ritual,” I ask, “now that you’re learning more about my family tree?”

She rolls her eyes. “Please, I knew what I was getting into. Well, mostly… Why didn’t you tell me about the whole ‘becoming a goddess’ part? I mean, Bea kind of implied that, but still…”

The tunnel begins gently sloping upward. The candles becoming fewer with larger gaps between them tell me that we’re getting closer.

“I didn’t intend to mislead you,” I say. “I guess was so caught up in making you realize the risks of performing the ritual that it didn’t occur to me to mention any of the perks.”

“To be fair, you did say that I’d live forever. It’s just that I guess I thought that I’d still be... me,” she says, voice sad.

“You will be—you *are*.” I squeeze her hand. “It’s just that you’ll have access to my magic as well as your own. Well, at least once you learn to manipulate it, but I doubt that will take you long.”

“I have magic?” she asks. “I mean, again, Bea said something about that, but I guess I didn’t really believe her.”

“All beings do,” I reply. “What do you think it’s been that you’ve felt passing between us? That’s your magic recognizing mine.”

“It—that electric feeling, I mean. It’s intensified since we performed the ritual.”

“I know. I feel it too. Once we’re—” I catch myself, remembering her refusal the first time I asked.

She stops and pulls her hand out of mine, then turns so that she’s facing me. “Once we’re what?”

Silently, I curse myself for not being more careful with my words. But her expression makes it clear that she expects an answer, and I refuse to lie to her. Even if having this particular conversation *now*, when we’re so close to the surface, seems ill-advised.

Sighing, I say, “When—if—we’re wed, we’ll have even greater access to each other’s magic. Total access, more than from just the blood.”

Alyssa glares at me, and my heart sinks.

“What do you mean *if*,” she demands. “Are you having second thoughts?”

Shaking my head, I pull her into my arms. “Never. But you said—”

She cuts me off. “I *said* ‘propose to me again, after we perform the ritual.’ Which you still haven’t done by the way.”

“Because we still don’t know whether it worked, whether I’m cured,” I say, unable to keep the frustration out of my voice. “And we won’t know until I try to walk out into the sunlight.”

“It worked,” she says, voice calm.

“Not for certain.”

“This is stupid,” she says, twisting out of my arms and walking ahead. “I didn’t turn into a monster, did I? But if you insist on even more proof, then let’s hurry up and get this over with.”

I start to fall back into step beside her, then change my mind and pick her up, cradling her against my chest.

“What do you think you’re doing?” she demands.

“Getting this over with,” I reply as I begin to run up the tunnel. “If you’re that impatient, well, I’m faster.”

“Neanderthal,” she mutters under her breath, but she wraps her arms around my neck.

I don't reply, simply putting on a fresh burst of speed when I spy a pinprick of light up ahead. A pinprick that's rapidly growing even as the ground levels off.

But when the tunnel finally opens up into another cave, I set her down and stare at the lush meadow on the other side of the opening. A stream runs along the far edge of the meadow. On the far side of the stream, Pegasus stands, his uncanny blue eyes trained on the cave.

"Finally!" he calls out. "Took the two of you long enough."

Ignoring him, Alyssa turns toward me. "Together?"

I nod. Then heart pounding, I take her hand as we move together toward the cave's mouth. And with the most enchanting creature I've ever seen at my side, I walk out of Hades and step into the sunlight for the first time in centuries.

Alyssa looks up at me and grins. "I told you it worked."

Staring down into her shining dark eyes, it seems impossible that this is real. Impossible that the curse is not only broken, but that it's ended because *this woman* somehow saw past my monstrosity and convinced me to take a chance... I bend down, ready to pull her into a kiss until I remember that we aren't alone.

Tearing my gaze away from Alyssa, I look beyond her to the stream. But true to his word, Pegasus is no longer there.

Turning back to Alyssa, I admit, "There was another reason why I didn't want to ask you again back in the tunnel."

She raises an eyebrow and waits.

I feel my pocket, relieved to find that the ring is still there. Slipping the small circlet into my hand, I drop to one knee so that now I'm the one looking up at her.

"Back before their marriage fell apart, Dad would meet us here sometimes during the summer and spring. All of my happiest memories have been in this meadow," I explain, taking her hand in mine, "and I didn't want to break that chain by having you say 'yes' in some other setting. Alyssa, will you marry me?"

"Yes, a million times yes," she says, and I slide the ring onto her finger. But then she adds, "Well, there is *one* condition."

Before I can reply, she places a finger against my lips and continues. "I refuse to elope, like Bea. I want a proper wedding. One with both Bea and Lora there. Hell, even my stepmother, I'd love to force her to dance at my wedding."

Her last statement, given all the fairy tale symbolism that's been thrown our way by my father, causes me to shake my head and laugh. "Love, you may be brilliant and adorable and sexy, but I'm a bit worried about your morality."

The briefest flicker of confusion flashes in her eyes as she replays her words. But as she seemingly remembers how Snow White's fairy tale originally ended, she puts her hand over her mouth,

suppressing a giggle.

“I meant a normal dance!” she protests.

For once, it’s my turn to raise an eyebrow. “Uh-huh, sure you did,” I say, unable to resist giving her a hard time after the heart attack she nearly gave me by saying ‘yes,’ then stating that there was yet another condition. “And fine, we can have a proper wedding. But you get at most two months to plan.”

Alyssa frowns. “Why only two months?”

I pull her down onto the grass, rolling her beneath me. “Because any longer than that, and you might be showing.”

She looks up at me, shock and desire warring in her eyes.

“Don’t look so surprised,” I say, pinning her hands above her head. “The fact that I have five brothers, not to mention dozens of half-siblings and literal legions of cousins, should have clued you in as to the virility of the men in my family—at least when we’re not cursed. And you *did* say that you wanted to have children.”

“That I did.” She bites her lip, then says, “Okay, deal. Two months.”

In response, I lower my mouth, capturing those bewitching rose-red lips in a bruising kiss.

And then in the sunlight, the true, real sunlight, we make love in a meadow of endless flowers. Afterward, we lie in each other’s arms, not just spent and thoroughly sated, but both of us changed, utterly changed. And all because my bride urged me to take a kiss for what a kiss was worth—and because she was too damn stubborn and foolish to let the dream go by.

EPILOGUE

STYX

MY CHEEK PRESSES against the soft plastic of the inflatable raft, warmed by the soothing rays of an artificial sun. As I float facedown in a melancholy of my own making, I trail one hand in the tepid, chlorinated waters of the pool.

What does it say about Bael's guests that even here, in this fantasy that could be anything they desire, these horrid chemical hygiene rituals are necessary for them to trust the water?

Proof that mortals generally trust in all the wrong things. They trust in authority and celebrity—i.e., *bullshit*—with ease. Yet how often do they trust the truths of their own hearts?

I may understand humans and all their sad whims and passions more than most gods, but is that really saying so much? And what does it even mean to “understand” another being? How can any true sympathy of understanding exist in a creation so fractured?

Another raft bumps into mine, causing water to splash up over the sides.

“If you’re going to mope in public, at least have the decency to cover your junk.”

Not opening my eyes, I lift my hand from the water long enough to flip the witch off.

The next moment I’m facedown in the water, raft gone. I consider puncturing Hecate’s raft in retaliation, but what would be the point? In a battle of escalating spells, the queen of the witches will always win—at least until the day when she finally pushes me too far, and I bind her in Tartarus with the other Titans.

Choosing to take my unplanned submersion as an opportunity to stretch my limbs, I swim downward with long, sure strokes until I reach the pool’s cement bottom. Rolling over, I place my hands behind my head and stare up through the wavering water at the false brightness of the sky.

While I’m sure the witch threw me in the water to force me to “snap out of it,” from this vantage point, it all seems even more futile. There’s a certain despair that arises from the awareness that you could stay submerged forever and not drown. Well, unless you’re Kore...

Chlorine stinging my eyes, not tears, I swim back to the surface, pulling myself out of the water onto the sunbaked tiles of the pool deck. A fluffy, white towel sails through the air, landing on my lap.

“I *asked* you to cover your junk.”

Wrapping the towel around my waist, I stand and walk over to a deck chair. I snap my fingers and a pair of black sunglasses appears. Before I put them on, I roll my eyes at the witch—who’s floating on an inflatable raft that’s the twin of the one she just destroyed. A haughty black Chihuahua shares the raft with her.

As I make myself comfortable on the deck chair, I consider pointing out that the tiny black triangles of Hecate’s string bikini cover even less than my towel, but I don’t have the energy for a verbal pissing match.

“Did you just come out here to ruin my nap?” I ask. “Or was there something you wanted?”

The witch’s own sunglasses hide her eyes. But from the tone of her voice when she replies, I can tell that the blue orbs of her eyes are anything but placid. “You’re freaking out the kids with your melodrama.”

I raise an eyebrow. “I’m going to assume that by *kids* you’re referring to my adult children. As for *melodrama*, I haven’t the faintest idea what you’re on about.”

“It’s not like you to stick around this long—particularly when there’s no logical reason for your presence. Bael and Alyssa’s wedding isn’t for another six weeks. I tried to tell them that you’re simply sulking, but they’re not buying it.” A mint julep, the glass instantly damp with condensation, appears in her hand. She takes a sip before continuing. “The twins are being even more reckless than usual because they’re paranoid that one of them is next.”

“And how is this *my* problem?” I ask, conjuring a drink of my own—a bottle of Belvedere, chilled.

“Why are you here, Styx?”

“Do I need a reason? There’s a break in my tour schedule and...” Sighing, I conjure a glass of ice as well, deciding to at least make a pretense at civility. The witch waits. “And I’m tired, okay?”

“Tired or depressed?”

“Is there a difference?” I ask, taking a sip of my vodka.

“You got what you wanted,” Hecate says. “The Snow White gambit worked, as improbable as that still seems. So why the pity party?”

I drain my glass and refill it before answering, despite intoxication being nearly as impossible as drowning. When I speak, I don’t answer the witch’s question, not directly at least.

“Has it ever occurred to you that Aphrodite has been playing all of us for centuries?”

Hecate takes a sip of her drink. “I don’t follow. Playing us *how*?”

“With all of this ‘my curse can only be broken once they find their other half’ bullshit. What if there *are* no other halves? No soul mates, no fated unions, just fleeting, imperfect connections between beings doing the best they can until it all goes to hell.”

Hecate vanishes, then reappears on the chair next to mine. I note that while she left her dog on the raft, she managed to bring her drink with her.

“Ah, I see,” she says. “This is about Persephone. I should have known.”

“This has nothing to do with bloody Kore!” The glass of vodka shatters.

Hecate says nothing as she calmly waves a manicured hand in the air, banishing the glass shards and ice cubes to Zeus knows where.

I stare down at my bloody palm, the lacerations from the broken glass already healing. “Don’t drag her into this. Please,” I say in a quieter voice. “But watching Dante and now Bael and the fucking *ease* with which they broke the curse with women they barely know—you can’t tell me you haven’t wondered whether it was all just a sham, whether all their years of suffering were completely fucking pointless and they could have ended it at any time.”

“So quickly you forget all of Dante’s failures,” she says, voice laced with a condescending pity that I hate. “While you may have refused to bear witness to him binding all of his failed attempts in Tartarus, I did not. But you *did* see firsthand how difficult it was to awaken him from my potion. A potion that I will remind you caused a slumber that could only be broken by true love’s kiss. Just because Bael played it safe and got it right on the first try is no reason to dismiss the concept of fated love entirely.”

“It’s possible your potion merely wore off,” I reply, voice churlish.

“I came out here to try to help you, Styx, not to be insulted. My potions *never* wear off. And you still haven’t acknowledged Dante’s previous failures.”

“Those are easily enough explained away.” I pause and take a swig from the bottle of Belvedere, formulating my thoughts. “In the past, he failed because he lacked confidence in himself and his partners, in his ability to be loved. Kore did a number on him with her reaction to that curse. This time, you literally *promised* him that it would work out with Beatrice, filling his head with that nonsense about her kiss proving she was *the one*.” I roll my eyes and take another drink of vodka. “Same with Bael. He had the example of his brother’s recent success, plus you reassuring him that your matchmaking works and that Alyssa was the chit you chose for him. None of that proves that it was fate, though. Merely that you’re adept at manipulating others to act as you desire.”

Hecate shakes her head. “And here I thought you were claiming to be upset with Aphrodite. Now I discover you’re really pissed at me because you’re too stubborn to admit that you’re mad at yourself for driving Persephone away.”

Closing my eyes, I breathe deeply and count to ten, then to a hundred.

Hecate damn well knows that she shares the blame for what happened to Kore. But we *had* an agreement not to discuss her anymore, to try to put the past behind us and form the friendship Kore had always wanted us to have. But just because the witch has for some reason chosen to go back on that agreement today, doesn’t mean that I will. I *can’t*.

Because as much as I loath to admit it, I still need Hecate’s help.

“I am *not* ‘pissed at’ you, as you so elegantly put it.” Opening my eyes, I remove my sunglasses and stare at the witch, hoping she can hear the sincerity in my voice. “If anything, I’m grateful. Because even if true love is bullshit—hell, *especially* if it is—you still managed to break the curse for two of

my sons.” I take a deep breath, then add, “And I’m hoping that you can do that for the others as well.”

She sighs. “If it were that easy, Styx, I would have already. And not for you, but for her... even if she’s not here to see it.”

“But it is that easy,” I protest. “All you have to do is find four more women who are reasonably well suited to my boys and convince them—”

“I will not be a party to creating more monsters to be bound in Tartarus,” the witch snaps, cutting me off. “You may have decided that Aphrodite is full of shit, but I haven’t. Do you have any idea what it took to find Alyssa and Bea? I performed spells that are well beyond the abilities of most of the fakes and frauds who call themselves witches—and I’ll have you know that I double and triple checked those spells.”

I frown. “I thought you said you hacked into their world’s computer system?”

The witch rolls her eyes. “Yeah, I did that *too* in order to narrow down the possibilities. Their world’s Orwellian database is at least good for that much. But even that I accomplished by having magic interact with the technology. Fuck. To a degree, magic is already embedded in their technology. Ask Alyssa sometime to show you the mirror app on her comm device if you don’t believe me. And speaking of her comm device... you know, if you weren’t so wrapped up in your own shit and paid more attention to what’s happening in the mortal realms, you might have some questions about that thing.”

My earlier resolve to get along with Hecate falters. “If by ‘shit’ you mean trying to find my wife and my brother, who are both *still missing*, then yeah, I’m pretty bloody busy. What mortals do before they reach my realm isn’t my concern. So why would I give a fuck about what communications devices they use while above ground?”

Hecate stares at me, her eyes still unreadable behind her sunglasses. “Gee, maybe because Alyssa has an app on hers that can show users scenes from Hades? And the comm device itself is called a fucking *Lethe*.”

I take another drink of my vodka, trying to process this and failing. Finally, I say, “Why are you only telling me this now?”

She shrugs. “The name of the comm device itself wasn’t necessarily a red flag. Mortals have always randomly borrowed names for their shit from myths. Running shoes, car companies, music streaming services, soap, sports teams, bookstores, chewing gum—”

I hold out a hand, interrupting her. “But you didn’t think to tell me when you discovered an app that can see into my realm?”

“I’m telling you now, aren’t I?” she asks. “I honestly didn’t look too closely at the Lethe themselves until Bea begged me to figure out a way to get hers to work in the other mortal realms. Before that, my focus had been on the government databases themselves.”

“Who do you think is behind it? The app that shows Hades?”

Again, the witch shrugs. “Haven’t figured that out yet, but do you actually care?”

I consider her question. While she waits, the witch conjures herself another drink.

Do I care what mortals do before reaching me? Not really, at least not beyond using that information to figure out their fates in my realm.

“Fine,” I admit, “I don’t actually give a fuck. You’re right. But we can’t have mortals spying on Hades.”

“Already hacked in and disabled those permissions across the whole system.” Hecate takes a sip of her drink. “And you might not care, but *I’m* curious. So eventually, I’ll figure out who they are and how they did it.”

I yawn. “It’s almost certainly another god, you know. Mortals aren’t that clever. But since you seem to have the app situation under control, can we get back to *my* problem? I still have four kids with fangs. We can agree to disagree for the moment on whether Aphrodite is a lying cunt or why the ritual worked. But you’re really telling me there were only matches for two of the six in that database you hacked?”

Hecate snaps her fingers, and the dog floats from the raft into her arms. The witch cuddles the small dog against her chest and ignores my question.

“How many matches were there, Hecate?” I prod.

“It would serve you right if I just lied,” she says, taking a sip of her drink. “But to answer your question, there were three.”

“Well, then why didn’t—”

She cuts me off. “But it may as well have just been two. The third is... complicated.”

“Complicated how?” I ask, with a feeling of foreboding.

Because Hecate’s machinations luring both Bea and Alyssa to the Lotus were complicated. Putting Bea into a position where she’d actually come across Dante in that damn cave was complicated. Hiring a hedge witch to try to manipulate Alyssa and Bael into giving their relationship a chance was complicated, as was dealing with the headache around managing Alyssa’s mortal fiancé. So for Hecate to use that word now...

Once more, the witch sighs. “*Complicated* in that it would take a freaking fairy godmother to free her from her dome.”

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